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LIFE OF HERBERT HENRY ASQUITH,  
LORD OXFORD AND ASQUITH







HERBERT HENRY, EVELYN, AND WILLIAM WILLIAMS ASQUITH  
AS CHILDREN

*(From a Water-colour)*

LIFE OF  
HERBERT HENRY ASQUITH,  
LORD OXFORD AND ASQUITH

By  
J. A. SPENDER AND CYRIL ASQUITH

VOLUME I

WITH 25 ILLUSTRATIONS

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## PREFACE

LORD OXFORD AND ASQUITH said on one occasion that he desired no biography, and on many occasions that he disliked long biographies. On the first point it has been necessary to overrule him, and on the second the authors of this book can only hope that in presenting two volumes they have not exceeded what he would have thought reasonable. He held the highest office for a longer period continuously than any Prime Minister since Lord Liverpool, and the years of his Administrations were, both in home and foreign affairs, among the most critical and dangerous in the whole range of British history. They are years for which as yet there is no generally accepted historical record, and, except to those who lived through them, the part played by one man can only be made intelligible if the background of events is filled in.

The authors are jointly and severally responsible for the whole book. Their separate contributions are marked by initials attached to the chapter headings, except in a few chapters which represent joint authorship or editing.

Their special acknowledgments are due to His Majesty the King for access to the Royal Archives, and for gracious permission to use documents in cases in which the permission of the Sovereign was required; to Lord Oxford and Asquith's executors, Sir Maurice Bonham-Carter and Brig.-General the Hon. Arthur Asquith; to the Countess of Oxford and Asquith and other members of the family, all of whom have been most generous in their help. The Marquess of Crewe, one of the most intimate and trusted of Lord Oxford's friends and colleagues, read a considerable part of the book in manuscript, and supplied most valuable comment and criticism. The same acknowledgments are due to many others whose contributions appear in the book or who have helped with the loan of letters or with their testimony on doubtful points.

J. A. S. AND C. A.

*September 1932.*





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## ERRATA

- Page 32, line 6. For "in the same year" read "in the next year"*  
 „ 68 „ 28. *For "1899" read "1889".*  
 „ 221 „ 1. *For "originally read" read "once read".*  
 „ 221 „ 3. *For "but of . . . Borbonius" read "but of sixteenth  
 or seventeenth century writers".*  
 „ 226 „ 5. *For "croative" read "plastic".*  
*Throughout. For "Princess Bibesco" read "Princess Antoine Bibesco".*

# LIFE OF LORD OXFORD AND ASQUITH

## CHAPTER I

### BIRTH AND EARLY HISTORY

Birth and early circumstances—Death of his father—Poverty and dependence—  
The City of London School—Characteristics at this period—Gains the first  
Balliol Scholarship at the age of seventeen—Some letters. C. A.

HERBERT HENRY ASQUITH was born on the 12th September, 1852, 1852-1870 at the Croft House, Morley, in Yorkshire. The name of Asquith is hardly to be found in any southern telephone directory. In Yorkshire, spelt now with a "q" now with a "k," and sometimes with both, it has for centuries been not uncommon. Pious research has traced Herbert Henry's pedigree to Mayors of York in the time of Henry VIII. In 1664 one Joseph Asquith was incarcerated in York Castle for his participation in the "Farnley Wood Plot"—an unsuccessful attempt to restore the Commonwealth. This Cromwellian strain, latent for two centuries after, may be thought by the fanciful to have reappeared in the subject of this memoir, whose visage not a little recalls that of the great Protector.

The Asquith family or clan were mostly Puritan Independents (later Congregationalists) by faith, and wool spinners or weavers by trade. As domestic manufacture yielded to the influence of the industrial revolution, they seem to have become masters in a small way of business. Such at least was Joseph Dixon Asquith, who lived and carried on his business at Morley in the middle of the nineteenth century. A cultivated man, pious, agreeable, and somewhat lacking in business initiative, he died suddenly at the early age of thirty-five, leaving a widow and four small children (of whom H.H. was the second) practically without support. The widow, Emily Asquith, was a woman of personality and distinction. A devoted and courageous mother, she had a strong bent for foreign

1852-1870 languages, an omnivorous appetite for books, and a biting turn of phrase and humour. From the sofa on which, crippled with bronchitis and heart-trouble, she spent most of her waking life, she easily dominated any company or household in which she found herself. The letters which H.H. and his elder brother Willans sent her weekly, or oftener, from school, and which she scrupulously preserved, show how strict an account they had to render of their time and activities at the Bar of maternal ambition. A place dropped in French or arithmetic was a fault to be cautiously avowed, carefully extenuated, and promptly retrieved. But though she had a vein of iron in her composition, a good sense of humour and natural kindness saved her from being a Roman parent.<sup>1</sup> Throughout her life she kept watch with loving vigilance over every department of her children's lives, not excluding their wardrobes: and on one occasion H.H., returning to her from a political meeting indifferently hosed, was met with the *cri-de-cœur*, "Oh, Herbert, don't tell me those are your *speaking* trousers!" She took a keen interest in public affairs: and when she died, in 1888, in her sixtieth year, one of her last anxieties was to be assured by her son (then about to appear for Parnell and the Nationalists before the Parnell Commission) that the famous letters were forged. This assurance he was happily in a position, even then, to give.

Herbert Henry was eight years old at the time of his father's death. Of these eight years (six spent at Morley and two at Mirfield to which the family moved on), little in the way of incident is recorded or can be gathered from survivors. We know that the Asquith ménage subsisted in "simple comfort,"<sup>2</sup> going to chapel assiduously and hearing and reading innumerable sermons. Both parents were religious zealots and keen sectaries. Until the middle of the eighteenth century the religious community in Morley had been a harmonious body worshipping at the "Old Chapel," St. Mary's. In 1763 there was a schism. A dissentient minority, which included Joseph Asquith's forbears, hived off and built the "Rehoboth Chapel." To this schismatic persuasion Joseph and his family adhered. Accordingly visits to the Rehoboth Chapel bulk large among the earliest recollections of H.H., who seems to have

<sup>1</sup> To this title her maternal grandmother, a Mrs. Wrigley, might justly have laid claim by virtue of a singular assertion of maternal despotism. Her daughter (Emily's mother) who married one William Willans, had long and beautiful golden hair. On the daughter's return from her honeymoon, the mother summarily, and without explanation, deprived her of this ornament, leaving her head as bald as an egg.

<sup>2</sup> *Memories and Reflections*, Vol. I, p. 3.

appreciated and approved, at a tender age, the precise shade of Congregationalism which his parents affected. For when at the age of about six, he with his attendant nursery maid met on a footpath a procession of children of the St. Mary's, not the Rehoboth, faction, he is said firmly to have obstructed their passage, and the "crocodile" of young heretics had to cross the road. This cannot have been long after the earliest memory he retained—that of carrying a flag in a procession of children organised to celebrate the end of the Crimean War. The Asquith parents were Puritans enough to look with some suspicion on recreations, particularly on cards and the theatre. But they do not seem to have pressed these taboos to inconvenient lengths. At all events H.H. succeeded in teaching his mother whist, overcoming her religious scruples by substituting chessmen for cards! Thus cheaply was conscience appeased. Cards and theatres, the forbidden fruit of his Nonconformist youth, became the staple diet of his mature leisure; but they never displaced, to the end of his life, an ingrained appetite for sermons.

Joseph Asquith died in 1861. On his death, the family, which had until then subsisted modestly on its own resources, was thrown on the bounty of relations. Emily Asquith's father, William Willans, was at this time a substantial woolstapler and a man of some civic eminence in Huddersfield, for which town he had stood as a Liberal and nearly been elected in 1851. He now came to the rescue. He transplanted the family from Mirfield to a house, not far from his own, in Huddersfield itself. There they were to remain until his death three years later. Of the four children living at the time of Joseph Asquith's death, only one (Evelyn, Mrs. Wooding) now survives. The two youngest, Edith and Lillian, died in infancy or childhood. The elder son (and H.H.'s senior by one year), William Willans, who died in 1918, was a man of real intellectual distinction. A fluent debater, with a strong gift of sarcasm and humour, and the wielder of an easy and polished pen, he might, with a more commanding presence and better health, have achieved success in one of the more spectacular walks of life. A precocious feat of his is perhaps worth recording here. He and his brother first joined the City of London School at the ages of twelve and eleven. Shortly afterwards it came to their notice that an old apple woman, who had been accustomed to ply her trade within the precincts of the Houses of Parliament, had been expelled from the time-honoured "pitch" which she had come to regard as her own. This violation of prescriptive rights stirred the spleen of the boys, and Willans (probably in collaboration with H.H.) drafted and sent to the Press

1852-1870 a letter of reasoned remonstrance. This production was mature enough in style to be published without question and cogent enough in argument to secure the old lady's reinstatement in her old domain.

For reasons of health Willans had to be withdrawn from the City of London School at the age of sixteen, and it was not until his younger brother had been in residence some months at Balliol that he was allowed to join him there. He took a first in "Greats" in the year 1875 and gave the rest of his life to teaching at Clifton College, where for many years he was a housemaster. He was a fine teacher, and, notwithstanding his almost Lilliputian frame, a successful disciplinarian, abundantly able to quell any attempted ragging by the power of his tongue.

On their father's death the two boys, nine and eight years old respectively, were first sent to a day school in Huddersfield. In August 1861, they were moved to a Moravian boarding school at Fulneck, near Leeds. The teaching here seems to have been competent, but the conditions sombre and somewhat Spartan. From this and other places of education H.H. wrote regularly to his mother and to his sister Eva, and his letters have in the main been preserved by their recipients. Of the whole series the only ones that strike a plaintive, and almost the only ones that strike a childlike, note, are the first two or three from Fulneck. On the 4th August, 1861, writing to his mother, he utters the secular lament of the boy exiled for the first time from the comforts of home :

FULNECK,  
*August 4th, '61.*

MY VERY DEAR MAMMA,

I received letters from Elizabeth and Eva this morning. I am sorry to say that very unhappy [*sic*] here and we don't want to stay much longer we can't find what to do and it makes us very miserable we often say to each other and Johnny Shaw that we would rather live in the wood than here. I have not time write much more so believe me ever

to remain,  
Your loving son,  
BERTIE.

And again two days later :

FULNECK,  
*August 6th, '61.*

MY VERY DEAR MAMMA,

It seems we have an excursion here in the beginning of September and I suppose you know that we can go home on that day of going the excursion and I think that I would rather do so as we do not like the place at all for besides having nothing to do such dreadful smoke comes over from Pudsey that it makes everything quite black. The boys are

not allowed to go into the gardens as the girls are and the girls have much more of the terrace than we have. I do not like either masters\* or boys and therefore I do not like the place at all. The only amusement we ever have is about an hour in the cricket field when Willie and I make Dandelion chains for Mr. Kramer.

With best love to all believe me ever

to remain,

Your affte. son,

H. H. ASQUITH.

\* With the exception of Mr. Kramer.

P.S. Excuse sending white envelopes as have no black edges.

P.S. Please give my love to Auntie Mardie and tell her I am sorry I could not write to her.

They did not long continue to complain of having "nothing to do," in school hours at least. But they never got to like the school.

1863-4 was a year of upheaval for the Asquiths. Their grandfather William Willans died. Emily Asquith moved south, to St. Leonards. Willans and H.H. entered the City of London School as day-boys. Emily's eldest brother, John Willans, having no children himself, generously assumed responsibility for the education of the boys and took them to live with him in London. A little later John Willans migrated to Yorkshire; three other brothers contributed to the boys' school expenses,<sup>1</sup> and they lodged as paying guests in Lupus Street (Pimlico) and elsewhere in London.

The City of London School, founded by the Corporation of London about a hundred years ago, with the help of an ancient endowment, was, when Asquith entered it in 1863, a school of some six hundred and fifty boys, most of them destined not for the "professions" but for the office and the counting house. Its curriculum accordingly embraced, along with the staple ingredients of a classical education, such subjects as accounts and book-keeping. Planted at that time—it has since migrated to the Embankment—in Milk Street, off Cheapside, it lacked many of the amenities enjoyed by more ancient foundations. For instance it had no cricket or football field. The school buildings were cramped. Classes were excessive in size, consisting in some cases of fifty or sixty boys under the care of a single master, who could not humanly give them adequate individual attention. Notwithstanding these handicaps, by 1863 the school had under its first headmaster, Dr. Mortimer, made notable strides. Its numbers increased. Its

<sup>1</sup> The sums advanced for their education were later on scrupulously repaid by the boys.

1852-1870 alumni won high academic honours. Within a year or two of Asquith's arrival Mortimer was succeeded by Edwin Abbott. Abbott, himself once a pupil of the City of London School, had been Senior Classic at Cambridge in 1861—the year before Jebb attained that distinction. In 1865 he returned to his own school as headmaster, bringing to the task a powerful personality, the finest edge of Cambridge scholarship, and a genius for teaching. He rapidly set his impress on the school in general and Asquith in particular. The latter, speaking nearly thirty years later, acknowledged that there was no man living to whom he lay under the same debt of obligation.

Asquith entered the school at the age of ten or eleven in the fourth form—about half-way up—and rose smoothly and steadily to the top. In September 1867, when just fifteen, he was in the sixth (highest) form : in 1869-1870, he was captain of the school. In the winter of 1869, at the age of just over seventeen he won a Classical Scholarship at Balliol—the first of only two at that time annually awarded. This was then, as now, the summit of any public school boy's intellectual ambition, and Asquith was the first pupil of the City of London School to attain it. He often said in later days, with complete sincerity, that this was the happiest moment of his life.

“ We may have what are called successes in after life, but there are always compensating circumstances which take away from their glamour and their pleasure, and which perhaps an inexperienced spectator might ignore. But when you are seventeen, when you have no fears about the future, when you have no compromising past to rise up in judgment against you, the attainment of success is a pure, an unalloyed, an unmitigated satisfaction.”<sup>1</sup>

It may be convenient at this point to suspend what has so far been a bald narrative of fact, and to inquire what in this early phase was Asquith's mental and physical make-up ; what manner of schoolboy or young man he was. To gather any semblance of an answer to these questions from himself, beyond the barest of external facts, was at all times a hopeless quest. These were, indeed, questions he never put to himself. He was too lacking in vanity for its concomitants, introspection and self-analysis, to find a lodgment in his mind. To himself he was not only not an object of admiration ; he was not an object of curiosity, barely even of attention. Moreover, the bias of his mind was to presume that everything—himself

<sup>1</sup> Speech at the John Carpenter Club, on his appointment as Home Secretary in 1892.

included—was ordinary, until the reverse was demonstrated beyond 1852–1870 reasonable doubt. And although the course of his personal history must have satisfied him that there were unusual elements in his composition, he would have considered any attempt to determine their character a pure waste of time. Hence we have to rely, for our present purpose, not on any self-revelation, but on the fitful light of contemporary documents and persons.

“A tall, well-proportioned, light-haired boy, with finely chiselled features, a fresh complexion, and attractive speech and manners.” Such is the description given in 1928 by an anonymous contributor to the *City of London School Magazine*, of Asquith as he appeared shortly after joining the school. The following account is quoted from another school contemporary<sup>1</sup> in the same article:

“He passed into the sixth form at an early age. In those days even sixth-form boys were not allowed to specialise, but whether their bent lay towards Classics or Mathematics, they had to swallow a certain modicum of the less palatable diet, with small doses of a modern language and Chemistry. I think that Asquith was the first who, for his exceptional promise in Classics, was exempted from Mathematics. It was on the principle that to him that hath shall be given. Those of us who were not so privileged had to do our Greek Iambics surreptitiously in the hour dedicated to Mathematics, and found the kind offers of the Mathematical Master (the charming Dr. Francis Cuthbertson) to help us out of any difficulties in Mathematics vexatiously distracting. But preferential treatment for Asquith seemed natural enough. We recognised that he was exceptional, not only in classical ability (which perhaps does not obtain the same recognition from schoolmates as in later years), but in his gift of speech. In the School Debating Society he was without a peer. The style of his speeches differed from that of the ordinary school-boy's as that of Macaulay's history differs from ‘Little Arthur's.’ We were not too young to feel the contrast and to forecast a brilliant future for the young orator. Even then it was not fire or passion, not so much powers of persuasion or of sarcasm, but the fine phrasing, the elaborate periods, the ambitious rhetoric that impressed us. I remember Dr. Abbott (who often presided at our debates) afterwards remarking on the fascination that Asquith's speaking had for him, in watching the audacity with which he would launch out into elaborately constructed periods, and conduct them calmly to an adequate and impressive finish. Sometimes no doubt it was the result of careful preparation, but more often spontaneous and springing from a natural gift. I remember when I had assigned to me the task of making a Prize-day speech in French in honour of the pious Founder, whose praises were sung in five languages, I exhausted my own small powers in devising something new on so well-worn a theme and then buttonholed Asquith for ‘copy.’ Without hesitation he gave me out of his superfluity (having the Greek speech himself to provide) a

<sup>1</sup> Dr. John Mortimer Angus, for many years Professor of Latin and Philology at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth.



1852-1870 succession of brilliant paragraphs, for which I afterwards sought adequate French expression in vain. No doubt also he read reports of speeches, and lost no opportunity of hearing speakers. The only oratory within reach of the School was in the Law Courts and City Council meetings at the Guild Hall,<sup>1</sup> and into these he would sometimes turn during the short break between morning and afternoon school, and would find amusement as well as instruction. In later years he spent the half-hour's break in acting as one of the 'monitors' to keep order among the younger boys along the school corridors and in the alleys and courts round the school building, where six hundred boys, turned loose after three hours of study, might prove something of a nuisance. I had opportunities, as his colleague, of seeing the pleasing blend of justice and mercy, that marked the rule of the future Home Secretary, and of hearing, not only the stern rebukes that he administered to the culprits, but the *sotto voce* words of sympathy with the 'poor little beggars' whose excess of spirits he checked and perhaps half-envied. . . .

Asquith had little interest in any subject except Classics and English—or at least gave no sign of it. I remember his irreverent jests in the Chemistry classes. . . . Asquith took German and I French, so I have no personal knowledge of his achievements in the German class, but I remember being told that if the class was not well prepared, they could count on Asquith to carry on a conversation (not in German) with the teacher till there was little time left for the lesson."

To this account may be added some impressions<sup>2</sup> of Asquith's headmaster, Dr. Abbott :

"Young Asquith impressed me as a pupil of remarkable promise. In those days the Fifth Form used to learn writing and book-keeping. And, bearing in mind my own experiences as a Fifth Form boy in the writing-room, where fruitless efforts were made to improve my handwriting, and initiate me into the mysteries of book-keeping, I had great pleasure in inviting Mr. Asquith from those studies into the Sixth Class room, where I might give him an occasional five or six minutes of extra supervision in his classical work. I am afraid that is about the only good thing I did for him, because, as to the rest, he did everything for himself. There was nothing left but to place before him the opportunities of self-education and self-improvement; simply to put the ladder before him, and up he went. It is said that some men are born to greatness, and some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them, but Mr. Asquith appears to me not only to have achieved greatness, but also to have been born with those faculties which could not fail to achieve it. I will not dwell on the very great assistance which, as Captain of the School, he gave me in keeping up the tone, as well as the intellectual standard of the higher classes. But I would gladly say this about him, that in all

<sup>1</sup> It was there, as he said in a speech of over half a century later, that he "first watched the working of a bicameral system." This was his speech on the occasion when he received the freedom of the City of London in 1925 from the hands of my father-in-law, Sir Adrian Pollock, the City Chamberlain. One of my sons, Luke Asquith, was present at the ceremony and is probably the only person who has seen this honour conferred by one of his grandfathers on the other.—C. A.

<sup>2</sup> *Mr. Asquith*, by J. P. Alderson, chapter I.

his studies he showed a thoroughness that commanded my respect and admiration. And I remember him more especially in the School Debating Society as one, who besides having decided opinions on most subjects, appeared to have taken the greatest pains to ascertain the facts that were the basis of his opinions ; and also as one of the few, the very few, who could plunge into an intricate and involved sentence with such an artistic prescience of what he had to say, that all the members of the period fell, as it were, into harmonious co-operation, so that in the end he brought his hearers to a full and satisfactory, a logically and rhetorically complete and weighty conclusion, without any sacrifice of point, force, and, above all, of clearness."

1852-1870

The last sentence is in form as admirable an illustration of the art which it describes, as it is in substance a just and sensitive appreciation of Asquith's gift of speech in one of its salient aspects.

As a classical scholar Asquith was rather strongly and finely competent than freakishly endowed. What his tutors discerned was the application of an extraordinarily muscular intelligence to a subject for which it had a marked sympathy rather than the uncanny specialised aptitude of a Jebb or a Murray. He himself would have acknowledged more than one superior in this field among men of his generation at Oxford (e.g. the late Lord Milner), though he was probably as good a scholar as any one of his year. His command of the English spoken word was on a different plane. It was consummate. Time no doubt brought increase of knowledge, ripened judgment, mellowed the severity of youthful intransigence, rounded certain angularities of manner and of outlook. Yet there is an astonishing consensus among qualified judges who listened to him at different periods, that in the pure technique of speaking he excelled as much, and on just the same lines, at the age of nineteen or twenty as at any time later in life. The power of presenting complex or intractable matter with effortless lucidity, the massive but beautifully proportioned architecture not only of the sentence but of the paragraph and the speech as a whole, the gift of gathering the whole weight of the body behind each dialectical blow, the destructive strain of irony and humour, the dignified, resonant Latinised diction, the rejection of claptrap and fustian, the capacity for capturing not a word which would express his meaning adequately, but the word which alone would express it perfectly—these, the distinctive qualities of his oratory in manhood and middle life, seem to have been present not merely in their germ, but almost in their maturity in his debating débuts at the City of London School and the Oxford Union.

John Carpenter, a mediæval officer of the Corporation of London,

1852-1870 whose bequest had been used to endow the School, was, as has been indicated by Dr. Angus, the subject annually of formal encomia in various tongues by the boys. Asquith's English declamation, composed at the age of seventeen, won the prize in July 1870.

As illustrating his early gift of expression it is perhaps worth quoting here :

MY LORD MAYOR,

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

In acknowledging our obligations to the heroes of the past, it is always a relief to be able to desert the commonplaces of eulogy, and to point to the fabric built upon their self-denying efforts as the best memorial at once of their greatness and of our gratitude. The great man whom we commemorate to-day, could his spirit hear the tribute of our praise, would I am sure rejoice that we should turn from the obscure details of his career, to dwell in preference upon those after-fruits which have crowned with an honourable immortality the name of John Carpenter.

Without expatiating, then, upon the often-told tale of his life of faithful and devoted service to this great city—upon the reforms he projected, the improvements he set on foot, the ordered records he indited of the laws and customs of London—upon the active piety and the ungrudging generosity and the constant sympathy with suffering, which make his history one long recital of self-renouncing acts of charity—we would point you rather to the result of the last and greatest expression of his bounty as constituting his best title to your gratitude and admiration. For more than thirty years the City of London School has been the sole depository of this trust, and may now be justly called upon to render an account of her stewardship. If she is challenged as to the purely intellectual character of the education she has given we refer you to the calendars and prize-lists of our universities—to the Senior Wranglers and Senior Classics of the last fifteen years—and remind you that since we last assembled here, an old pupil of this school, Professor Seeley, has been selected by the Crown to fill one of the most important professorships at the University of Cambridge. But this is not all. If out of the many thousands whom the City of London School has educated, she could only point to the small body who have obtained University distinctions as trophies of her teaching, she would be able to say but little for the manner in which she has discharged her task. To-day especially, when for the first time we are able to congratulate ourselves that an old pupil of the School occupies the chair of its committee, we are reminded that the world of commerce no less than the world of scholarship is indebted to the far-sighted liberality of our Founder. In the warehouses and offices of this great city—in towns and villages throughout the land—wherever the English name is known and the English language is spoken—there are to be seen men, it may be in humble positions of life, doing with vigour and with courage the work that lies before them—distinguished by the steadiness of their industry and the integrity of their conduct—men who are not ashamed in the midst of our nineteenth-century civilisa-



#### FOUR GENERATIONS

Evelyn Wooding's (and H. H. A.'s) Grandmother, Evelyn Wooding's eldest son, Evelyn Wooding,  
and Emily Asquith (mother of Evelyn W. and H. H. A.)



1852-1870

tion to deny themselves and to forsake ambition that they may do their duty and obey their conscience—men who have learned to be great where the eyes of the world never seek for their idols and the voice of renown never recites the unchronicled deeds of valour; and among these unheralded heroes not a few are to be found who received their first impulse to honest toil within these walls—who learned here their first lessons of truth and courage and self-restraint—and who ascribe with loving gratitude not merely the material prosperity, but the purity and the happiness of their lives, to the benevolence of John Carpenter and the training of the City of London School.

This is the title in virtue of which we claim for the renown of our Founder some more worthy celebration than the salvoes of rhetorical artillery which annually resound to his honour in this place. John Carpenter and those who, like him, devoted their lives to the spread of knowledge and enlightenment appeal to us to show our gratitude for their generosity by imitating their example and following in their footsteps. Civilisation has advanced many stages since their day. The chaos of conflicting elements in the midst of which they lived has given place to the order and stability of modern society. The boundaries of thought, then so restricted in their scope, have been enlarged and widened to include all that the human eye can see or the human mind conceive. But one thing we have neglected in our onward progress. Stationary and unchanged, there still confronts us as we gaze with self-complacency upon the triumphs of our modern civilisation, as dense a mass of ignorance as that the sight of which at once dismayed the courage and inspired the energies of the great men of the past. With such a spectacle before our eyes, each word in which we celebrate their praise condemns our own neglect. The more we dwell with pride upon their memory, the more their memory reminds us that the inheritance of their spirit is the first and the only title to the inheritance of their fame. And if the pressing need for educational reform is at last both asserted by public opinion and recognised in the councils of statesmen, for this result let us remember that we have in some degree to thank the foresight and beneficence of men like John Carpenter. But now that the importance of this great work is once acknowledged, we are not to delay the final accomplishment. This year is the thousandth anniversary of the accession of King Alfred. Now if ever the example of those who subdued more potent obstacles than sectarian rivalry calls upon us not to permit the din of partisan warfare to drown the voice of national necessity. They bid our country rise from the arena of this wordy contest, and while, to the reproach and scandal of our time, Europe is returning to the barbaric practices of a bygone age and the continent is being plunged into the horror of a needless war, they call on England to take her part in a nobler strife—to add her name and prowess to the side of truth in the great battle that is ever being waged with ignorance and vice. And thus, their efforts will not have been in vain, nor their strength spent for nothing; they will not have left merley—as the poet says—

“ That footprint upon sand,  
Which old-recurring waves of prejudice  
Resmooth to nothing ”;

1852-1870 because they will have inspired their successors with the same zeal, and incited them to like achievements; and it will be the chosen task of their posterity

“to watch  
The sandy footprint harden into stone.”

Asquith's bent as a schoolboy and undergraduate was rather severely intellectual, and his outlook mature. When a boy of fifteen is absorbed in the dusty niceties of constitutional history and finds refreshment in such topics as the disestablishment of the Irish Church or the psalmody of the Reformation, it is difficult to repress a sense of misgiving. May there not, one asks, be lurking here some of the unlovely qualities often found in association with “an old head on young shoulders?” Such apprehensions were in the present case needless. No one was ever less of a prig or a pedant. He was, subject to a certain natural reticence, “a good mixer,” possessing not only a strong sense of humour, but what is not always found in combination with it, a strong sense of fun. His letters to his sister Eva, with whom he corresponded copiously at this period, are outpourings of exuberant nonsense and rhetorical leg-pulling, directed impartially against the writer and his correspondent. If at Oxford there were those who thought they detected in his manner some taint of superciliousness—a certain cold self-sufficiency and conscious remoteness from the common herd—the explanation is not far to seek. In some ways, though by no means in all, he was shy. There will always be many people who think that if the heart is not worn on the sleeve it is not in the right place: and Asquith's reserve, notably in matters which stirred his feelings, was capable of being misread as standoffishness. Years later, he admitted and deplored this quality in a letter to a friend<sup>1</sup> who had, to some extent helped to break it down: “There are some things which, as you say, it is difficult to materialise, and there are reticences which are not inconsistent with the most intimate and confiding friendship. I am hedged in and hampered in these ways by a kind of native reserve, of which I am not at all proud, for it is due partly to temperament, partly to shyness—a most potent negative force—and probably in part to vanity.” Shyness apart, he undoubtedly had, for objects which he thought deserved it, an abundance of intellectual contempt. Ignorant pretension, sciolism, platitude, preciosity, prolixity, half-truths and non sequiturs, hazy generalities, hackneyed clichés, sloppy reasoning—these and their like did gall a temperament otherwise equable to a fault, often provoking him to

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. (afterwards Lady) Horner.

expose and to castigate without quarter. His impatience was, in fact, with the proposition rather than the speaker, with the fault, not the delinquent. But the victim was often human enough to overlook this distinction. He knew for certain that he had been made to look or to feel an ass. The rest was conjecture, and he might excusably fail to divine beneath the severity of Asquith's scorn a disposition most reluctant to humiliate or hurt the feelings of anyone.

This chapter may fittingly be closed with a few excerpts from his correspondence with his mother and sister, which afford a glimpse here and there of his daily round :

*To his Mother.*

30 Jan., 1863—Ætat 10.

"Last night we went with Mr. Arthur Wright to hear a lecture of Mr. Allon's at Union on the psalmody of the Reformation, Lutheran, Calvinistic, English, etc. . . .

The city is dreadfully muddy and it rains to-day, as it has done for the last few days. We generally take a little stroll in Cheapside after lunch, but we get awfully knocked about during it. We have got above the other 60 boys in Latin, each having been first though we began at the bottom. We are now 2nd and 4th."

*To the same.*

26 April, 1865—Ætat 12.

"Nothing is talked of at present in London but the victory of Grant and surrender of Lee which is considered by most as the grand finale of the American War. It is certainly quite time that it were ended. I was looking over the killed and wounded and captured the other day and amongst the rest I saw Genl. Lee's two sons who were both brigadiers. One of them was killed at Gettysburg and the other was captured by Sherman. He must feel the loss greatly, poor man."

*To the same.*

10 May, 1865—Ætat 12.

"I hope you are well ; we are rather doubtful as we have not heard from you for some time. I hope you received Willie's letter last Sunday. You would gain from it a pretty good account of our visit to the House of Commons. Uncle went again on Monday night and heard the rest of the debate, at least as far as about the middle of Disraeli's speech. The cleverest speech was undoubtedly that of the Rt. Hon. Robert Lowe, but he quite deserved the thrashing Mr. Bernal Osborne gave him. He charged him with having been in Parliament for twenty years and professing at every General Election to be a good Liberal, and also with having sat in no less than *three* Administrations whose bases were in each case, Reform.

The debate has been the best and the longest they have ever had on



1852-1870 the Bill though the division was one of the most adverse. I was looking over the Division List this morning and found no less than 30 professing Liberals in favour of Lord Elcho and Mr. Black. . . ."

*To his sister Eva.*

Dated 20 May, 1861—Ætat 9 (but the real date is possibly 1865—Ætat 13).

"I am very sorry that I did not write you yesterday, but my excuse must be that I forgot, as I was bothering myself, in company with some other members of my species with a variety of abstruse and uninteresting mathematical problems, which notwithstanding the great good it is supposed I shall derive from them hereafter, are at the time, to say the least of it, dry. . . .

Let me congratulate you on your acquaintance with the case of Constance Kent—I should like to know your valuable opinion on the subject, as by putting it in the newspapers it might gain me a fortune, and what is more, a reputation. I hope Mr. and Mrs. Hurdale enjoyed their chicken. I think you deserve a very severe reprimand for attempting to corrupt your Grandmother's morals by teaching her whist. But I now conclude in haste with best love to all."

*To his Mother.*

13 Dec., 1865—Ætat 13.

"I have just returned from the Court of Queens Bench where the Lord Chief Justice (Cockburn) is presiding. One of the Counsel had just made a very agitated address to the jury, and at its conclusion a witness was put into the box whose evidence being that of an illiterate man on an uninteresting subject, I did not care to hear. The man in question was a foreman or something of that kind, of a shipping or dock company. I want to hear the Chief Justice sum up, and so I shall go to the Court again on the conclusion of this."

*To his Mother.*

22 Jan., 1868—Ætat 15.

"I am writing for this number of the Magazine an article on 'The Tory Ideal'; 'Phantoms of the Past,' a sort of cut-up, etc. of *Coningsby*. It is assuming rather gigantic dimensions and will, I fear, have to be divided.

We passed a very good Sunday—at any rate as far as sermons are concerned. In the morning we heard Mr. Martin—in the afternoon, Dean Stanley—and in the evening Baldwin Brown. All very good. Mr. Martin preached from Romans somethingth and 8th, 'He that giveth seed to the sower,' etc., you know it I daresay. Dean Stanley from the 53rd Isaiah—and Baldwin Brown, whose was the best of the three, on the Ministry of Scepticism to Truth."

It is a relief to find that he did not spend his whole leisure comparing sermons. The same letter records a visit of inspection to . . .

"... 'the fattest lady in the world' who is exhibiting in Fleet Street, 7ft. round the body, 36 in. round muscles of the arms, of colossal stature—not yet 19, in a low dress and—an American!"

1852-1870

*To the same.*

1 April, 1868—Ætat 15.

"It may interest you to know that in the debate, which came off yesterday, I moved an amendment to my brother's motion to the effect that woman is mentally though not morally inferior to man, which, in spite of his opposition was finally carried by a majority of 2."

*To his Mother, on her fortieth birthday.*

3 May, 1868—Ætat 15.

"Very many happy returns of to-morrow. Though the forty years then completed have brought with them a full measure of pain and sorrow, yet they have been surrounded and crowned with loving kindness and tender mercy—and I trust and pray that those which remain may attain to the same reward of joy without an equal trial of suffering. But though no earthly treasure has been laid up—though health and pleasure have been in great degree denied—there is still that treasure to enjoy which is laid up where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal—there is still that rest to enter upon which remaineth for the people of God—and there is still His 'Well done' to be heard, whom not having seen, we love. The assurance of these as it grows more strong and more full makes all other objects recede into nothingness."

*To the same.*

14th May, 1868—Ætat 15.

"On Tuesday—as we had a holiday, it being 'Founders' Day,' we went to the meeting of the Congregational Union at the Weigh House and heard Dr. Raleigh deliver his inaugural address on the relations of Christianity and progress. It was a most magnificent address and was very much cheered. There was afterwards a discussion on the Irish Church and various other matters. In the evening I went to a meeting called by the Reform League in St. James' Hall to support the disestablishment of the Irish Church. The Hall was very full, and though there were a few rows at the beginning and some individuals whose sincerity was suspected suffered the ignominious punishment of being 'turned out' (i.e. kicked all the way down the Hall and out of the door)—notwithstanding these slight disturbances and occasional interruptions to the speeches, the meeting was on the whole unanimous, and sometimes enthusiastic."

This would hardly suggest a "holiday" to a modern boy of fifteen. But Asquith seems from his earliest years to have browsed with real enjoyment in somewhat stony and sunless pastures.

*To the same.*

20 May, 1868.

"We heard and saw Mr. Philip on Sunday morning as he would tell you. In the evening we went to the Abbey, and heard Archdeacon Wordsworth preach. He had the impudence to go in for a regular defence of the Irish Church: told us that at the not far off end of the world

1852-1870 Gladstone would be the first to hide in a cave and call the rocks, etc. to cover him ; and that though Noah and the beasts were not the church of the majority yet the Ark was not swallowed up, etc. etc. The congregation testified their approval by walking out in the middle in vast numbers. Poor Dean Stanley sitting opposite the pulpit had the pleasure of being cursed in his own Abbey."

His letters to his sister are sometimes in a vein of humorous objurgation.

*To his sister Eva.*

5 Aug., 1869.—Ætat 16.

"I perused your interesting scrawl with mingled emotions—of joy, that there was so little chance of your showing up in this neighbourhood within the next six weeks or so—of sorrow, that estimable persons like Mr. and Mrs. Jas. Cullen should have to endure the unutterable burden of your constant presence.

But now, as the poet says :

'The sky is changed, and what a change !'

You may imagine, my adorable sister, with what a thrilling ecstasy the pericardium was pierced when we learnt that within a fortnight it would be ours to gaze upon your light green eyes again. . . ."

and so on, in a vein of rapture.

Some features of his childhood serve as a reminder of how far civilisation has advanced since the 1860's. For instance, once the small boy on his way to school saw at Newgate the hanging corpses of a gang of five murderers, exposed, according to the gruesome habit of the time, to the public gaze for an hour after their execution.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Memories and Reflections*, Vol. I, p. 10.

## CHAPTER II

### OXFORD

Goes into residence in 1870—Balliol under the new Master—Academic achievements  
—President of the Union—His circle of friends—Gains a Fellowship at Balliol  
(1874)—Relations and affinities with Jowett—Asquith's lifelong sentiment  
for Oxford. C. A.

#### I

ASQUITH went into residence at Balliol in October 1870, and was 1870-1874  
joined there somewhat later by his brother Willans, the phases of Age 18-21  
whose education had been deranged by poor health. The Balliol of  
that time mustered both in its Senior and its Junior Common Room  
a striking assemblage of personalities. Of Jowett, who had just  
succeeded Dr. Scott (of the Greek Lexicon) as Master, and Asquith's  
relations with him, something will be said hereafter. Among the  
Balliol team of tutors were Thomas Hill Green, Lewis Nettleship,  
Baron de Paravicini, Mr. (afterwards Professor) T. B. Case, William  
Lambert Newman, and Henry Smith. Among his contemporaries  
within a year or so each way were men who were to attain  
eminence in the most varied fields: scholars and teachers such as  
Alfred Goodwin, W. G. Rutherford, or W. H. Forbes; the  
philosopher Cook Wilson; the economist Edgeworth; Andrew  
Bradley, and Churton Collins, destined to enrich Shakespearean  
criticism and polite letters; the future Bishop, Charles Gore, and  
another man of multiform distinction and achievement, Alfred  
Milner.

Balm it must have been to the young man's spirit to turn his back  
on the roar and dust of Cheapside and to exchange the disciplinary  
control of six hundred striplings for the equal companionship of  
adult intellect, the clash of polished contention, the wells of learning  
old and new, the green lawns and exquisite buildings of Oxford.  
Into the undergraduate life of the place he plunged smoothly and  
with the zest of one who enters at last his own element. His interests  
ranged far beyond the pale of the ordinary classical curriculum: but  
within it he achieved high distinction, gaining easy first classes in

1870-1874 "Mods" and "Greats," the Craven Scholarship, and a Prize  
Age 18-21 Fellowship at his own College. The chapter of accidents denied to him both the classical University Scholarships which are the seal and consummation of scholastic ambition, but the margin by which he missed them was so narrow as to be quite unimportant. He was "proxime" for the Hertford in 1872, and in the same year for the Ireland. In 1874 he so nearly won the Ireland that the Examiners, divided in opinion, took the almost unprecedented step of awarding him a special prize of books. He had finished a set of Latin Hexameters but had had no time to fresh copy them, and instead of putting in his product in the rough, made the mistake of tearing it up. To his great satisfaction, his posterity were fortunate enough to retrieve the "ashes" of both these reverses: and oddly enough one of the very examiners who had refused him the Ireland was among those who awarded it to his son Raymond.

He was fundamentally far more interested in politics than in scholarship, and it was not surprising to find him speaking at the Union in the first month of his first term. The theme of his first speech was that hardy annual, the retention of the Bishops in the House of Lords. On this and other occasions within the next few months he voiced the orthodox Liberal view, speaking in support *inter alia* of the disestablishment of the Church of England, and of non-intervention in the Franco-Prussian War; though in one debate he unexpectedly figures as the champion of conscription. In 1872 he carried by a tiny majority a motion to the effect that "The disintegration of the Empire is the true solution of the Colonial difficulty," and in the same spirit crossed swords two years later with Lord Milner on a resolution in favour of Imperial Federation: an encounter from which dated a lifelong friendship. In these conflicts the Tories could reckon on the big battalions, and Liberals had as a rule to console themselves with the pretension—well or ill founded—to superior debating power. But the Union, critical often to the point of cruelty, has always been generous in its recognition of gifted heterodoxy: and Asquith's prowess gained him an ascendancy enjoyed perhaps by no other speaker of his generation. Cool, fearless, scornful, challenging, always ready, and practically always at his best, he was an almost invulnerable debater, and left on all who heard him an impression of commanding power which years of subsequent obscurity were unable to obliterate. Sir Herbert Warren, afterwards President of Magdalen College, and a close friend of his at this time, is by no means alone in recording the opinion that he spoke practically as well, if not quite as well, at this

1870-1874  
Age 18-21

period as he ever did later. His rise nevertheless through the various grades of the official hierarchy was not unobstructed. He became indeed Treasurer in 1872, but was unsuccessful in his first candidature for the Presidency, which he was not to attain till his last undergraduate year. It is characteristic of him that he introduced into the Union, as Treasurer, the institution of afternoon tea and smoking, and perhaps characteristic of the "home of lost causes" that both these changes were stubbornly resisted. He soon became a member and in some ways the central figure of a circle of undergraduate friends by no means all drawn from his own College. Among those in whose society he found a peculiar relish were Herbert Paul, of Corpus, Thomas (afterwards Sir Thomas) Raleigh, and A. R. Cluer, since a Metropolitan Magistrate and now Judge of the Shoreditch County Court. Mr. Paul was already illustrating his command of polished and punishing phrase, and Asquith cherished throughout his life early examples of his friend's prowess in this sphere. He would often recount how a naïve speaker at some debating society, who was rash enough to say in Mr. Paul's presence "I may not be a great orator, but I am at least a good Churchman," was met with the unkindly comment that the first part of his observation was "obvious" and the second "of limited interest." Nor did he take less delight in the flashes of saturnine wit which sometimes broke through the taciturnity of Thomas Raleigh. Raleigh, on hearing a long-winded *causeur* (to whose performances he had listened throughout an evening in silence and deepening gloom) described as the "life and soul of the party," was heard to murmur in sepulchral tones, "In the midst of life we are in death." Others with whom he was on terms of intimacy were Herbert (afterwards Sir Herbert) Warren, for some decades the genial and accomplished President of Magdalen, who contributed to an earlier biographical study of Asquith two chapters about his life at Oxford to which we are heavily indebted; Joseph Solomon, a man of protean parts, facility, and accomplishment; and Henry Broadbent, Asquith's successful rival for the Ireland Scholarship in 1873, whose massive scholarship has been dedicated throughout a lifetime, first as a Master and now Librarian, to Eton College.

Asquith seems to have taken his many University successes and his few reverses with an assured serenity. To have missed the Ireland twice, once by inches and once by millimetres, was galling; but he was unperturbed, and was the first, on the occasion of his failure in 1873, to communicate to Mr. Broadbent the news of his victory. In his last few weeks before "Greats"—a

1870-1874 season for most of hectic absorption in the coming ordeal—he  
 Age 18-21 appears from his correspondence to have spent two or three hours  
 a day sailing on the upper river and some of the residue of his time  
 in speaking for Mr. Brodrick against Lord Randolph Churchill at  
 the Woodstock election. His insouciance was justified by the event,  
 for he was the only representative of Balliol in an unusually small  
 first class. He followed this up by winning the Craven Scholarship  
 —then a more important distinction than the Craven Scholarship  
 of to-day—and in the autumn of 1874 a Fellowship of Balliol. From  
 this last achievement he derived not only kudos, but some solid  
 financial benefit extending over the next seven years—a convenience  
 of which he stood in sore need. The other Fellowship awarded in the  
 same year went to Andrew Bradley.

## II

For his Alma Mater Asquith at all times cherished gratitude, sympathy, and even veneration. Oxford was perhaps the only place which held for him romance. In the evening of his days nothing gave him more pleasure than to preside over the Universities Commission: and among minor disappointments few were keener than his failure to secure election as Chancellor of Oxford. Nor was this sentiment surprising, for between the man and the place there was a strong affinity. Among his deepest instincts was a sense of the significance and majesty of the past. Oxford offers all that the most exacting historical imagination can desire. He took the keenest delight in finesse and felicity of expression, in style and perfection of language. To this appetite she ministered by steeping him in the study of the flawless models of antiquity. If he rejoiced and excelled in the clash of debate, she supplied him, through the Union, with a microcosm of the House of Commons. If he aspired to a career, she gave him a local reputation and set the ladder of fortune before him.

Few public men of his time have set so much store by education in general and in particular by the classical dietary which is Oxford's chosen staple. For the "academic" in the sense of the unreal, he had a robust scorn, and often reminded political visionaries that we live not "*Platonis in re publica sed in hac Romulidarum fœce.*" But for the "academic" in a different sense—in the sense in which it is applied to studies worth pursuing and in fact pursued for their own sake—he had a very enthusiastic respect. While he would never allow that a classical education lacks utilitarian value—holding on

the contrary that for those who are capable of it it is a supreme intellectual training—the claims he made for it went far beyond those which can be urged for a serviceable mental gymnastic. But let him speak on this subject himself :

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“ The claim I make for them ” (classical studies), he says in a Rectorial Address some thirty years later, “ covers much wider ground. The man who has studied literature, and particularly the literature of the Ancient World, as a student should, and as only a student can—I am not speaking of those to whom it has been merely a distraction or a pastime—such a man possesses resources which, if he is wise, he would not barter for a King’s ransom. He finds among men of like training with himself a bond of fellowship, a freemasonry of spirit and understanding, which softens the asperities and survives the conflicts of professional or political rivalry. He need never be alone, for he can, whenever he pleases, invoke the companionship of the thinkers and the poets. He is always annexing new intellectual and spiritual territory, with an infinitude of fresh possibilities, without slackening his hold upon or losing his zest for the old. There is hardly a sight or sound in nature, a passion or emotion or purpose in man, a phase of conduct, an achievement of thought, a situation in life—tragic or comic, pathetic or ironical—which is not illuminated for him by association with the imperishable words of those who have interpreted, with the vision and in the language of genius, the meaning of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

For the present, however, the enjoyment of these impalpable blessings had in his case to yield to the urgent business of making a livelihood : and perhaps the most valuable material service Oxford rendered him was by furnishing an arena for his outstanding gift of speech. It was his performances at the Union which brought him the first fruits of recognition and repute, and marked him indelibly as a man who would be heard of later. After he left the University, the obscurity from which he had emerged seemed for a long time to engulf him again. But the candle lit at Oxford was not put out. The suggestion and promise of greatness clung to his name through long years of seemingly thankless struggle and when, quite suddenly, they received visible confirmation, many could truthfully declare that they had never doubted the outcome.

Among these was the head of his College. “ Asquith will get on ; he is so direct,” had been Jowett’s summing up. When Asquith went up to Balliol, Jowett had newly succeeded Scott in the Mastership. The relationship therefore of tutor and pupil, within whose ambit Jowett’s most distinctive work was done, never subsisted between them. Their contact nevertheless at breakfasts, on long walks,

<sup>1</sup> *Ancient Universities and the Modern World*. Inaugural Address as Rector of Glasgow University, 1907.



1870-1874  
Age 18-21

and during those worst *mauvais quarts d'heure* of a Balliol Undergraduate when he had to read his weekly essay aloud to the Master, was continuous and its influence lasting. One of the central articles of Jowett's creed was that want of worldly success is no necessary index of spiritual distinction : that rational ambition is a merit and not a stigma : and that the intellectual flower of the nation should direct its destinies. The Master's influence was not needed to implant this doctrine in Asquith—he held it already—but intercourse with Jowett no doubt confirmed its hold on him. The young man had no more respect than his mentor for the “fugitive and cloistered virtue,” which “slinks out of the race” and shrinks from the “dust and heat.” He never could understand how an intelligent man should not desire the capacity to influence events—the bigger the events the better—or fail to rejoice in its exercise. A further bond of sympathy between them was the strongly practical bent which they shared. Asquith recoiled from ideology and had no taste for speculation. He was keenly interested in the workability of institutions : hardly at all in their abstract symmetry or perfection. Jowett, similarly, disclosed in later life a capacity for pure business for which a life dedicated to the study of Platonism and theology had hardly prepared the world. Again, the two men shared a prejudice against obscurity of expression and a conviction that it results, in nine cases out of ten, not from profound but from muddled thinking. This prejudice it was perhaps, and this conviction, which made Asquith, notwithstanding an ardent admiration for Thomas Hill Green, a lukewarm student (though an unimpeachable examinee) in the sphere of philosophy. The “fuliginous jargon” of those who sat at the feet of that great teacher was, to a mind which loved strong daylight, alien and suspect. He saw in it a convenient veil for intellectual charlatanism ; and an unpromising instrument for the attainment of truth ; unless metaphysic is indeed, as the cynics declare, the “search of a blind man in a dark room for a black hat which is not there”—a view to which Asquith may at times have inclined. Actually no one ever discovered what views, if any, he held about the Ultimate and the Absolute. Probably he considered that most speculations on these subjects were a beating of the air. The treacherous region in which premises are almost lacking and conclusions unverifiable was not congenial to him. He watched from afar and without enthusiasm the “ghostly ballet of bloodless categories,” while his friend Haldane surveyed it with smiling zest from the wings, and almost ogled the performers.

Before leaving Jowett, it may not be out of place to quote from a letter<sup>1</sup> in which Asquith has given an impression of that remarkable personality : 1870-1874  
Age 18-21

“ I am afraid poor old Jowett is dying. It seems but the other day that my wife and I were staying with him. We had a very pleasant party : not too large and well assorted. Death is indiscriminating and inexorable. Jowett’s work perhaps is almost done. He will certainly leave no successor. It is already difficult to conceive of the Oxford in which, partly by sympathy and partly by antagonism, he was formed : a place in which people quarrelled over the infinite pettinesses of the Tractarian controversy, thought (as Mr. G. and Lord Coleridge do to this day) that Bishop Butler had spoken the last word in philosophy, had hardly even heard of Heraclitus or of Hegel, and believed that with the abolition of tests Liberalism would have finished its work and done its best—or worst. Jowett, in his day, did probably more than any other single man to let some fresh air into the exhausted atmosphere of the common rooms, and to widen the intellectual horizon of the place. In my time he was already looked upon, by the more advanced spirits, as an extinct volcano, and even a bit of a reactionary. He certainly viewed with uneasiness Green’s militant and contagious propaganda, and long before the days of Home Rule he was quite out of sympathy with Liberal politics. He never at any time (I should think) had anything definite to teach, being always an eclectic with a horror of one-sidedness. Dogmatic statements, whether negative or positive, jarred upon him and he was too well-bred intellectually ever to be a fanatic. Nowhere else in the world but in Oxford could such a man have been persecuted, and even have worn for some years, the halo of a martyr. The secret of his power lay not in what he did or suffered or thought, but in what he was—a person with the magnetism of an apostle and the shrewdness of a man of the world.”

<sup>1</sup> To Lady Horner, in the early 1890’s.

## CHAPTER III

### EARLY PROFESSIONAL LIFE AND MARRIAGE

Asquith's choice of the Law as a profession—A limbo between Balliol and the Bar—  
A reading party at St. Andrews—Settles in London—Pupil to Charles Bowen  
—A disheartening wait—Marriage to Helen Melland—Henry James and  
R. S. Wright—The tide begins to turn. C. A.

#### I

1874-1886 ASQUITH had decided to practise at the Bar, and had become a  
Age 22-34 student of Lincoln's Inn. A political future was throughout  
unquestionably his aim. He adopted the law as a breadwinning  
expedient and as a means of approach to his real objective. The  
calculation was justified in the end. But more years than he or his  
friends had reckoned on were to intervene before its consummation.

His choice, when he had no financial reserves, of the profession  
which makes such reserves most desirable is typical of a certain  
cool, quiet adventurousness in his disposition. He went to the Bar  
at the age of twenty-four without funds; he married at twenty-five  
on resources which in proportion to the undertaking were hardly  
more adequate, and most of the five children<sup>1</sup> of his first marriage  
were born before his means had materially increased. At thirty-  
four he took what is often regarded as the risky course of entering  
Parliament while still a junior in small practice. He "took Silk"  
within a year of making his first real mark as a Junior. And when  
at thirty-nine he entered the Cabinet of what promised to be, and  
was, a short-lived Government, he had no assurance that he would  
be permitted to take the course, then unprecedented in an ex-  
Cabinet Minister, of returning to legal practice when his spell of  
office ended. In all the major decisions of his life from his earliest  
days the voice of caution was silenced, and his action determined  
by a vein of native hardihood or even a touch of the gambler's  
temper. It was in the same spirit that when in the 1880's he had  
by some means saved about £300 he went out and spent almost  
the whole of it on a diamond necklace for his wife.

A pleasant interregnum between his academic and professional

<sup>1</sup> Raymond, born 1878; Herbert, 1881; Arthur Melland, 1883; Helen Violet,  
1887; Cyril, 1890.

life followed in the autumn and early winter of 1874. He was retained to coach Lord Lymington, the eldest son of the Earl of Portsmouth, who was finishing with Eton and preparing for Oxford. This involved three months' residence with the Portsmouth family, partly at Hurstbourne Park in Hampshire, and partly at Eggesford Place. This last was an attractive country house in North Devon belonging to Lord Carnarvon, Lady Portsmouth's brother who was to be the principal actor in the famous negotiations between the Tory Party and Parnell in 1885. He has testified in *Memories and Reflections* to the kindness and consideration of his hosts and to his enjoyment of an entirely new milieu. Among those whom he met there, in addition to Lord Carnarvon, were Lord Houghton and the poet, William Johnson Cory, afterwards a Hampstead neighbour and intimate companion. Lord Portsmouth was a strong, though, unlike his son, not a politically active Liberal. Asquith seems nevertheless to have attended at least one political meeting, of which he writes to his sister Eva :

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"I sent you the *Western Times* on Saturday with an account of our meeting at North Taunton in which the speeches are fairly well reported. The gathering took the form of a luncheon with the usual accompaniment of indigestible food and vinegary wine. Lord Houghton made a very effective speech. . . . Lymington came out with some elaborate periods on the Press which were much applauded : his manner and delivery are extremely good and if he can compass a few ideas he ought to make a successful speaker."

At some meeting, possibly this one, Asquith seems to have spoken himself.

"A friend of mine," writes Mr. Herbert Paul, "who was staying in the house heard him address a political meeting and was electrified by the power of his speech. She told me at the time that she felt sure he was a coming statesman, although she knew nothing of his reputation at Oxford till I told her."

January to June 1875 was spent in residence at Balliol.

Asquith's farewell to an active academic life in the autumn of 1875 was marked by a "reading party" at St. Andrews, the members of which consisted in part of his more or less contemporary friends and in part of his pupils. Among the first were Herbert Paul, J. Solomon, F. P. Simpson, and Herbert Warren : among the second two men who later attained distinction in letters and the Law respectively—W. P. Ker and A. J. Ashton. Of this episode a lively account will be found in Sir Herbert Warren's sketch, previously referred to. Perhaps no institution affords so favourable an

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arena for the clash of congenial minds or blends in such happy proportions work and relaxation. Asquith's own recreations were never athletic : but he made on this occasion his first acquaintance with the ideal game for unathletic men under conditions which would make the mouths of many golfers of to-day water. "The now world famous links," he writes in *Memories and Reflections*, "we had in the afternoon almost to ourselves : and our clubs were carried by, amongst other eminent professionals, young Tommy Morris, then the open champion." Nor was this the only breach which this occasion witnessed in his sedentary or, at best, pedestrian, habits : for he seems to have created something of a sensation by suddenly ordering a horse, and riding eight miles to see some friends. Thus were consumed about six weeks in almost unmixed enjoyment, and Asquith little imagined as he lay on his back in the fields near Ladybank arguing about Swinburne, that his immediate surroundings formed part of a Division for which he was to be elected to Parliament in ten years' time and to remain member for thirty-two years.

In the autumn of 1875 he settled down at 90 Mount Street, and at this (for a penniless barrister) impressive address he enjoyed the society, as residents or migrants, of two of his most valued friends, Mr. Herbert Paul and Thomas Raleigh. From thence he writes to his sister (28 Oct.) : "I am going to see Bowen to-day and shall probably begin my regular attendance at Chambers in the course of a day or two." The future Lord Justice Bowen, to whose Chambers Asquith was now going as a pupil, had attained every possible distinction at Balliol—Jowett described him as the ablest undergraduate who had ever passed through his hands—and was by now "Attorney-General's devil" and perhaps the busiest Junior at the Bar. He was indeed already killing himself with overwork—for he died before reaching the age of sixty, though not before he had proved himself the foremost Appellate Judge of his day. In *Memories and Reflections* (Vol. I, p. 33) Asquith has given a lively account of his humour, urbanity, and manifold accomplishments, which included that of "jumping a cow as it stood." But they did not apparently include that of delegating work : and few of the laborious drafts of Asquith and his other pupils managed to pass the finely meshed sieve of his critical fastidiousness.

Bowen being already supplied with an understudy, Asquith did not stay on with him after the expiration of his year of pupilage but migrated to 6 Fig Tree Court, where he remained for six or seven of the most disheartening years of his life. He had no legal influence



*Elliott & Fry*

H. H. A.  
(1876)



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or connections, and during this period made no visible progress in his calling. He could hardly be said at this time to have had a practice at all ; and he was not the man to acquire one by forcing tactics. The rare briefs that came his way were ably argued ; but he lacked, or deliberately eschewed, some of the artifices by which the path of forensic success is smoothed. Trenchancy, lucidity, close reasoning, valuable assets in legal practice, he possessed in the highest degree: but these, as he found, are no sure passport to professional prosperity, and it is possible to indulge them to excess. The fastidiousness which recoils from judicious irrelevance or astute cajolery, and rejects the cuttlefish's strategy of darkening the waters, may prove a handicap rather than a help. " You have made the point too clear," was the significant reproach of a leading Silk—now a Judge—to the Junior who had " followed " him in the Court of Appeal. Asquith's method was probably open to the same reproach. He was constitutionally incapable of making a discreet fog. He would not apologise for taking up judicial time with what he considered judicial business, nor could he prevail on himself to dispense the conventional patter—suave, deprecating, deferential—with which, sometimes to propitiate a hard-hearted Bench, sometimes merely to gain time, even the most accomplished practitioners think it expedient to season the austerity of their submissions. And though his manner in time became less uncompromising and gained greatly in ease, he was to the last unwilling to " crook the pregnant hinges of the knee " before Judges, solicitors, or lay clients.

He was during this period an untiringly diligent student of Law. He lectured for the Law Society, mainly in Commercial Law. Notes of his lectures on the Law of Insurance and Carriage by Land, taken down in 1880 by a well-known solicitor, lie before me. He even projected and carried some way towards its completion a manual of the Law of Carriage by Sea, but was anticipated by Carver's great work on the same subject. But briefs were black swans in these days. It was not until 1883, when he had been called seven years, that the tide showed the first signs of turning. The exiguity of his practice and the rarity of his opportunities had not been able entirely to hide his light under a bushel : and it was more a surprise to him than to some others when R. S. Wright, afterwards a Judge and then newly appointed " devil " to the Attorney-General, Sir Henry James, invited Asquith to " devil " for him. From this time on his practice slowly acquired a solid foundation, and in 1889 a sensationally able cross-examination before the Parnell Commission transfigured his whole professional fortunes.



## II

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A crucial domestic event which took place within a year of the opening of his professional life has so far been passed over, namely, his marriage in the August of 1877 to Miss Helen Melland.

For some years the Asquith encampment on the South Coast had been acquainted with a family of the name of Kelsall. The Kelsall daughters—seven in number—lived at St. Leonards, and their cousins, Josephine and Helen Melland, the daughters of a prosperous Manchester physician, regularly came to visit them there. The entire bevy seems to have joined the Asquiths periodically in amateur theatricals: and two “operettas” entitled “The Cares of State” and “The Prince in the Iron Chest,” from the versatile pen of Willans Asquith, survive to-day. Willans, in one of these extravaganzas, cast himself adroitly to play opposite the best looking of the Kelsall sisters, for whom he was suspected of a secret weakness. His brother in “The Cares of State” figures prophetically as the Prime Minister of an imaginary kingdom at a time of national crisis. The Exchequer has been burgled and everything stolen—even the National Debt; and the Premier is enabled to gain an inexpensive reputation for profundity by showing that the loss of the latter is not an unmixed tragedy. It is hard to imagine the actor who sustained this rôle treading the boards with assurance or ease. Histrionics were never his métier, and the musical interludes must have been a thorn in his flesh. But his sufferings were not without their compensations, for these and similar occasions threw him much with Helen Melland, by the consent of contemporaries the most attractive of the group. He fell in love with her when he was barely eighteen. For many years—not less than five or six—his devotion ripened and deepened. Towards the end of this long probation—about the time of his last year at Oxford—he was rewarded with the knowledge that she returned his feelings, and they were secretly engaged. The situation, however, was delicate. He was penniless—she an heiress on a tiny scale, having a “dot” of some hundreds a year. The suspicion of fortune hunting might possibly have been fastened on him by minds more worldly than those of his future parents-in-law, and a ban might then have followed on their meetings. Both accordingly kept their own counsel and for six years their intimacy was tinged with the glamour of clandestine romance. But in the latter part of 1876, the two thought it opportune to open the eyes of her parents; and in the autumn of that year the suitor steeled himself for the ordeal of a visit to Manchester, to present

himself for their inspection, and to gain, if possible, their formal approval of the match. The result of this pilgrimage was all that he could have desired, and on 20th September he was able to write to his sister Eva :

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"I went on Monday to tea with the Mellands at Rusholme. . . . I was already aware that my feelings for Helen were returned by her : but I was uncertain about her father's approval. I found him very reasonable and kind, and though he would not sanction a formal engagement until we are a little better acquainted, he practically gave his consent to the whole thing. Mrs. Melland and Josephine were extremely cordial and considering the embarrassing nature of the situation and my total unacquaintance with most of the family, the matter was got through satisfactorily."

A little later Dr. Melland lifted the embargo on a formal engagement in the following pleasantly Victorian communication :

*Dr. Melland to Asquith.*

VICTORIA PARK,  
MANCHESTER.  
2nd November, 1876.

MY DEAR SIR,

Although I have not had any opportunity of becoming better acquainted with you personally, I have been able to make certain inquiries which have satisfied me that I may give my consent to your becoming engaged to my daughter.

I have the fullest conviction that your industry and ability will procure for you in due time that success in your profession which has attended you in your past career.

With kindest regards,  
Believe me, My dear Sir,  
Yours very truly,  
FREDERICK MELLAND.

In some other quarter—it does not appear what—counsels of worldly caution and of delay seem to have been pressed either on him or on her. Whatever their precise nature he impatiently brushed them aside. On 30th January, 1877, he writes to his mother :

"I am not surprised to hear what you tell me, but I have absolutely no respect for the conventional vulgarity with which they regard such matters, and I am more than ever convinced that H.'s health and happiness depend upon a speedy marriage and the chance of a quiet home, where she can be properly looked after and cared for."

For his father-in-law—a magnificent figure, with a fine voice in which he would roll out sea chanties—Asquith had a strong regard and affection. Among minor ties which united them was a scepticism

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which they shared (notwithstanding Dr. Melland's profession) regarding the pretensions of medical art. Both put their trust in the *vis medicatrix naturæ* whose unassisted virtue prolonged the life of Dr. Melland to the age of nearly ninety-eight.

### III

In August 1877 they were married and settled down at Eton House, in what used to be John Street, Hampstead. In this biggish attractive white house they lived for the next twelve years and four of the five children of their marriage were born. Standing immediately opposite the house where Keats lived, with a large garden on each side, and the then unvulgarised Heath within a stone's throw, its size and amenities would place it to-day far beyond the reach of a couple with joint resources reckoned in hundreds a year. The changed value of money no doubt accounts for much, but the explanation lies also in the extreme simplicity of the Asquiths' manner of life. By excising from their normal daily round all superfluity and show, they were able not only to afford their capacious dwelling, but to accumulate resources for modest indulgence and diversion—visits to the theatre, expeditions to Germany and Switzerland, and the entertainment of friends on a small scale.

They had ample room to put up guests and did so. Haldane came to their house in 1882 to convalesce after an illness. Mark Napier, a fellow barrister and friend of Asquith's, after a runaway match with a beautiful bride, spent his honeymoon there : and the children of Helen Asquith's sister, Josephine Armitage, would come to stay several strong, and open the doors of their house at Altrincham to counter-invasions by Asquith's growing family of children.

Few, if any, survive who can speak as eye-witnesses of this phase of Asquith's life and an imaginative reconstruction is perilous. We catch glimpses of him stretched in a hammock in his garden tearing the heart out of some forbidding treatise on economics, bowling lobs to his children, or letting off fireworks, for which he had a peculiar fondness. Apart from these stray lights the impression that emerges is twofold : a professional routine of grinding effort and persistent frustration, sweetened by a home life of great simplicity and flawless happiness. We know from one of his rare gleams of self-revelation how keenly Asquith felt at this period the weariness of knocking at closed doors. The hope deferred that maketh the heart sick, the impatience of eager faculty fusting unused were, as term followed infructuous term, his daily companions, making their presence felt whenever he heard a solicitor's clerk pause on the stairs outside his



*Mendelssohn's Studios, Notting Hill Gate*

HELEN ASQUITH  
(About 1888)



Chambers, and pass on. Though he kept his own counsel and presented an unruffled front to his small circle of friends, the iron might well have entered into his soul during these lean foiled years.

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But the home which his wife created and the atmosphere—rich in warmth and healing—which she diffused there would have brought balm to a more embittered spirit than his, and restored buoyancy to one more easily disheartened. While none of his letters to her survives—almost certainly he destroyed them after her death—he kept hers. They are such letters as pass between people who are seldom parted, and are mainly concerned with small household problems or mishaps, or incidents in which the children are involved. Bertie has got lost on the Heath : the mice have been at the preserves again : Raymond (aged seven) has seen a python's discarded skin at the Zoo and described it as an "outworn fetter broken and cast off by its soul." The atmosphere that disengages itself from the artless pages is one of penetrating homeliness. Fundamentals are not touched on, because taken for granted ; but the flotsam of trivial recorded incident is carried along on a warm deep current of implied understanding and devotion.

She was completely unworldly, and the only value she attached to his success was that it was his. Violent stimulus he neither demanded nor received from her : but she could be counted on, after the buffets of the day, to salve, to refresh, to rebuild : to "knit up the ravelled sleeve of care," and for a spell to make the world seem well lost. And when she died in 1891, he could say with truth that she had given him eighteen years of unclouded happiness.

#### IV

The means by which Asquith during the first seven or eight briefless years bridged the gulf between the few hundreds a year his wife brought to him and the modest competence which they in practice enjoyed, were of many kinds. His Balliol Fellowship, a valuable but wasting asset, expired in 1881. His main supplementary sources of income were lecturing and journalism. Reference has already been made to the lectures he gave in the early 'eighties for the Law Society. He also lectured on Economics for the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching. Forty years later he disinterred the printed summaries of these strenuous but ill-paid discourses : and was, he said, filled with amazement and humiliation to find how much he had forgotten. As to journalism, he wrote, week after week, until about 1885 one of the two leading articles in the *Economist*, and seems to have been

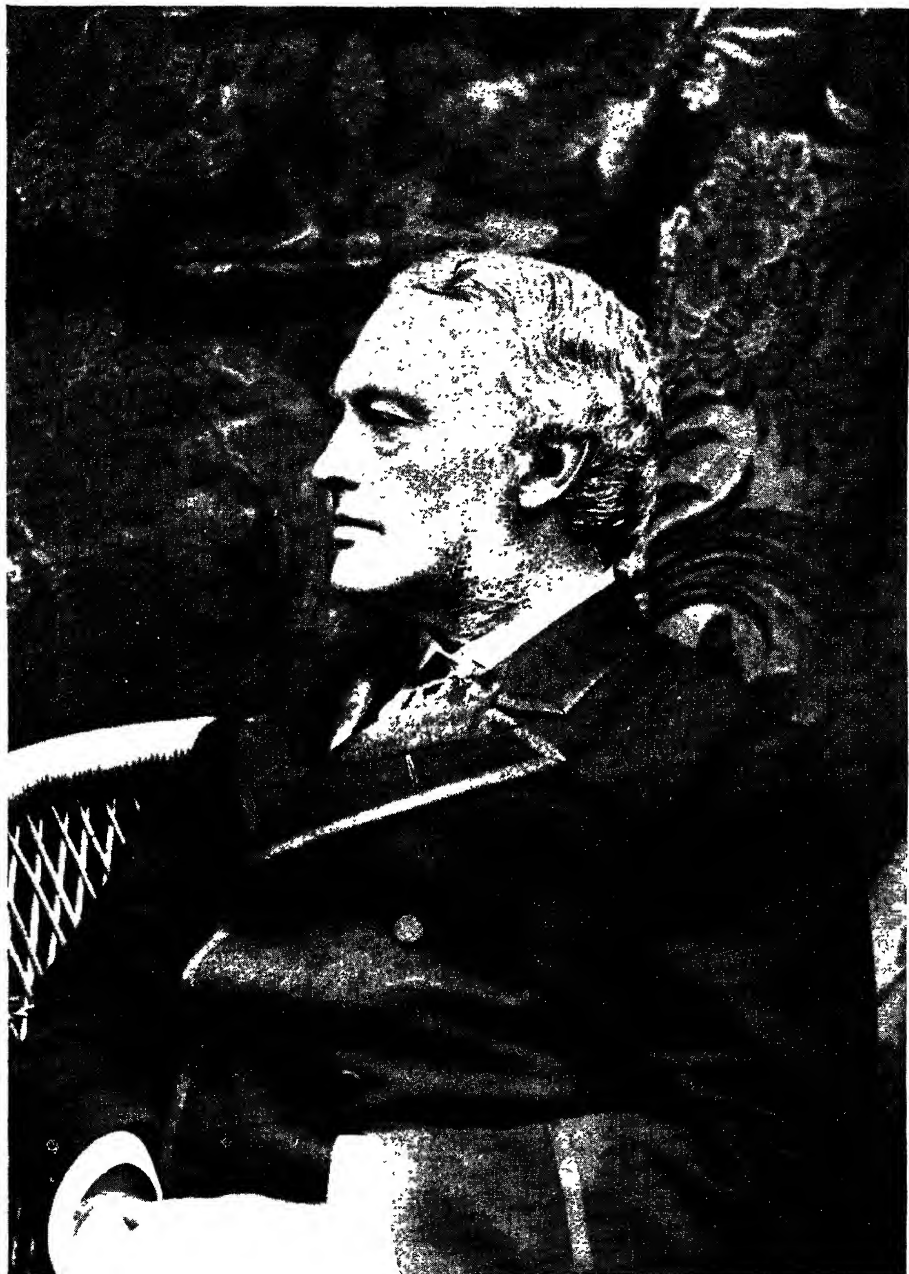
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retained for this purpose at a regular salary of £150 a year. A chance acquaintance struck up with R. H. Hutton, joint Editor with Townshend of the *Spectator*, bore fruit in regular contributions from his pen to that periodical covering a period of ten years and an enormous variety of topics. The small engagement books in which he recorded appointments and miscellaneous memoranda, contain, at the beginning or end, lists of books read during each year. The literary fare disclosed by these catalogues must have required the appetite of a cormorant and the digestion of an ostrich. Doubtless much of the energy which should have been absorbed by a busy legal practice overflowed into his leisure or was diverted into the stream of his journalistic sideline, but apart from this, tough subjects, then as later, attracted him as such.

He has described some aspects of his early days at Lincoln's Inn. The Courts in which he was to figure as a protagonist he visited in these days mainly as a spectator, and beguiled there an enforced leisure by listening to the impressive judicial eloquence of great common law Judges like Cockburn, or by observing the masculine despatch with which Sir George Jessel clove his way through his heavy list. Paucity of briefs seems never to have damped his industry, which, without haste or rest, appropriated every scrap of knowledge and experience which lies within the reach of a barrister without a regular practice.

Among the quaint incidents of these days may be counted the periodical visits to his Chambers of Herbert Spencer. Spencer had conceived the notion that the development of English Law and political institutions might, or should, or must turn out on examination to illustrate the principles of his "evolutionary philosophy." He asked Asquith to supply material which would test his hypothesis. The visits of a savant were a poor substitute for those of a solicitor, but any disappointment Asquith may have felt was disarmed by the exquisite courtesy of his abnormal client. He gave what help he could, but their joint labours seem to have borne no tangible fruit.

I have already recorded that in 1883, after he had been called seven years, Asquith became "devil" to R. S. Wright, then just appointed Junior Counsel to the Treasury or "Attorney-General's 'devil.'" The Attorney-General was Sir Henry James, later, as Lord James of Hereford, a Lord of Appeal in Ordinary. The link thus forged between Asquith and James was extremely opportune for the former and was strengthened by an incident which occurred in the first year of the new régime. In 1883 the House of Commons



SIR HENRY JAMES, K.C.  
Afterwards Lord James of Hereford  
*(From a photograph taken by Lcmd Battersea)*





was in the throes of the Bradlaugh imbroglio, and Mr. Gladstone was preparing to introduce the Affirmation Bill. He directed the Attorney-General to have a memorandum compiled on the law and history of the Parliamentary Oath. This task was assigned through Wright to Asquith, whose command of Constitutional lore and capacity for lucid and logical statement qualified him perfectly to discharge it. He bent his whole energies to the business and the masterly character of his product made a profound impression not only on the Attorney-General, but on the Prime Minister, to whom James was careful to reveal the identity of its author. The incident had important results for Asquith. Not merely had he been brought to the favourable notice of Gladstone, but James, having once had clear proof of his quality, took him under his wing and lost no opportunity of advancing his fortunes. The friendly patronage of the Head of the Bar towards an obscure practitioner of the Law gave place in no long time to a warm friendship and mutual respect which endured until James's death. James, who had considerable experience both of politicians and of lawyers, expressed the opinion that Asquith was, with the single exception of Gladstone, the ablest man with whom he had ever worked. He preserved the fateful notes on the Parliamentary Oath; and on the occasion of Asquith's second marriage in 1894, presented them, handsomely bound, to his wife.

1874-1886  
Age 22-34

From this time dates Asquith's visible progress at the Bar, soon to be eclipsed by his more rapid rise in politics. His legal career proceeded, once it acquired initial momentum, at an accelerating rate. For the first year or two his time was spent mainly as the unremunerated understudy of Wright, beneath whose eccentricities—he would sit all day in his Chambers with a top hat on and a pipe in his mouth—lay a very real good will towards his “devil.” Asquith found time to write a short manual on the Act of 1883 dealing with Electoral Corruption,<sup>1</sup> for the use of Election Agents. This in time resulted in his being retained as Junior in a number of lucrative Election Petitions. By 1885-1886, Wright's clients, who included the solicitors for several big railway companies, began to instruct Asquith himself. By the time he was elected to Parliament in 1886 he could be said to have a small but real practice of his own. The political prominence he assumed almost from the moment he entered the House of Commons gave a sympathetic impulse to his forensic advance, and contributed to his selection as Junior to Sir Charles Russell in the proceedings before the Parnell Commission in 1889. How the Parnell Commission in turn gave him—by what he

<sup>1</sup> Asquith, at the request of James, practically drafted the Act.

1874-1886 called "the accident of an accident"—his decisive opportunity,  
Age 22-34 and how that opportunity was seized, must be told in a later chapter.

## V

By 1888-1889 his junior practice had become large enough to enable him to take several pupils. In later life he used to complain of the "centrifugal" tendency of some of these. One of them, Mr. (now Sir W.) Guy Granet, early diverged into the railway world in which, and in finance, he was to attain such marked distinction. Another, Mr. (now Sir Anthony) Hope Hawkins, whom Asquith regarded as an extremely promising barrister, declared one morning his intention of abandoning the Law for fiction. "I have a thin vein, but I think it should yield about £ — ." The royalties on the novels of "Anthony Hope" must many decades ago have exceeded the modest figure named. A third, his close friend then and later, Mr. John Roskill, K.C.,<sup>1</sup> adhered to the Law and achieved success in it. The following sketch of Asquith's early professional days is from his pen :

"In January 1888 I became a pupil of Asquith at 1 Paper Buildings where he had been in Chambers with R. S. Wright since 1883. For the five previous years he shared a room at 6 Fig Tree Court with Henry Conyngham and Mark Napier. Work came slowly and until he 'devilled' for Wright clients were few. Indeed, before he took Silk in 1890 he was not in very large practice and often gave his pupils Wright's papers as well as his own. His clients were of the best ; he did not care much for jury work as he disliked repetition and was impatient of platitudes. But he enjoyed advocacy and his mastery of legal principles and of their expression found abundant scope in the non-jury and Appellate Courts. When discussing opinions, pleadings or any other branch of his work, one always felt the force of mind and depth of knowledge that led to his decision and admired the literary form in which that opinion was expressed. He rarely dictated an opinion or pleading, but wrote them himself, using a quill pen. I possess copies of a number of them which I still occasionally read, to profit by his learning and to enjoy the beauty and distinction of his language.

To be associated and in daily contact with such a man was a rare privilege. It was not accident that brought me to his Chambers. I had met him at his father-in-law's house soon after his first election for East Fife. His wife, Helen Melland, came of a family who were neighbours and friends of my parents. To her as well as to him I owe more than I can ever repay. When I came to his Chambers they lived at 27 Maresfield Gardens, Hampstead, and there I was not only a welcome but a frequent guest. His position in Parliament was already assured, but he was by no means certain that this was a good thing for his practice.

It was then unusual for a junior barrister to enter Parliament ; but

<sup>1</sup> Judge of the Salford Court of Record.

1874-1886  
Age 22-34

this never troubled him, for he looked upon the Bar as a means of livelihood and his ambition was for political, and not legal, promotion.

He told me, one evening at his house, while still a junior, that he could not accept a judgeship, but wished to be Home Secretary. I asked him what he would do if, after attaining that position he had to resign it owing to the defeat of the Government. He replied that he would return to the Bar. But had that ever been done before, I inquired, and had a Privy Councillor ever practised before Judges? He thought not, but added that he would do it, and I could see that he felt sure of himself. Neither of us then thought that in four years he would be Home Secretary.

He defended Cunninghame Graham who, with John Burns, was tried at the Old Bailey in connection with the disturbances in Trafalgar Square. Burns defended himself. This was the first case that brought Asquith into public notice. He had not long to wait for his next opportunity. The Parnell Commission began its long Inquiry in 1888. Led by Sir Charles Russell, he was Parnell's junior Counsel. I was in Court and heard Russell ask him to take the cross-examination of Macdonald, then Manager of *The Times*. This masterly cross-examination was the turning-point in Asquith's career. He often said that Macdonald was the easiest witness he had ever demolished, for his prejudices had literally obscured an honest, if limited, understanding.

The success came at exactly the right moment. He had been called twelve years. When the inquiry, after Parnell's vindication, dragged on for months, Asquith and his leader no longer attended it, and he was free to take other work which came in abundance.

In January 1890 he told me that he was going to apply for Silk, and asked me to remain in Chambers with him. Early in February he was made a Queen's Counsel, and on the same day his son Cyril was born. As a new leader he thought it right to go on circuit (the North Eastern) but only did so once, as he was unwilling to be away from his family and his Parliamentary duties for the periods that a circuit practice would require. There was, indeed, no reason for him to attend the circuit; for he soon had as much work as he wanted in London. One of his early successes as a leader was the Berkeley Peerage case, in which I was his junior. . . .

Work in Chambers and in Court continued to increase and his services were in great demand by the railway companies and County Councils. The Railway and Canal Traffic Act and the Local Government Act, both passed in 1888, raised many questions of construction, in the exposition of which his mastery was generally acknowledged.

Our association was by no means confined to work; we often went to the theatre when Parliament was not sitting, but he refused to come with his wife and me to any concert, and always disclaimed an ear for music. For the Easter vacation of 1890 he and I went to Provence and the Riviera. At Nismes I induced him to come to the opera: it was Gounod's *Faust* and not well done. He had enough in twenty minutes, when we left and walked round the Maison Carrée and the Amplin Theatre by moonlight.

Many years afterwards I saw him alone at a Queen's Hall Symphony Concert. Teresa Carreño played a Beethoven Concerto. I asked him what brought him there and he said that he had been told of her remarkable personality. He did not allude to the music."

## CHAPTER IV

### MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

Stands for East Fife in 1886—A narrow victory—Lord Randolph Churchill's resignation—Mr. Balfour becomes Chief Secretary for Ireland—The Coercion Bill—Asquith's maiden speech—Speech at National Liberal Federation—Opposes further attempts to conciliate the Liberal Unionists. C. A.

1886-1890  
Age 33-37 ASQUITH once said that most of the rash decisions he had taken in the course of his life had been due to the malign initiative of his friend Haldane. This counsellor it was, at any rate, mainly, who determined him, in the face of strong dissuasion from other quarters and with small apparent prospect of success, to stand for Parliament at the General Election of 1886. The sitting Member for East Fife, a Mr. Boyd Kinnear, had forfeited the confidence of the local association by declining to support Home Rule. The same body, on the 26th June, 1886, by a large majority, invited Asquith to contest the seat, and its invitation, tendered on a Saturday, was accepted the same day. By Monday Asquith had issued his Election Address, which *inter alia* proclaimed him a representative of "advanced Liberalism," and declared uncompromisingly for the full Gladstonian policy for Ireland.

Polling was due within a week of his arrival in the division. Mr. Kinnear was a local figure of some considerable influence and popularity, and as a Unionist could reckon on the Tory vote. The constituency consisted mainly of scattered villages, and Asquith had to address a vast number of comparatively small meetings; severe handicaps, these, for an obscure carpet-bagger to confront and overcome within narrow limits of time. Many of these gatherings were hostile. He has told how an audience of about a dozen, after listening to him in silence and heckling him for an hour, resolved unanimously that he was "not a fit and proper person to represent this division." On his side the newcomer could count the prestige of Mr. Gladstone, the support of an important section of the local Press, and not least his own dialectical prowess. "In clearness of statement," wrote the *Dundee Advertiser*, "cogency of argument and effectiveness of

illustration, we have scarcely heard him surpassed." These qualities tell with a Scottish audience. He gained on the electors and if the campaign had lasted longer his modest but sufficient majority—376—would doubtless have been larger. The actual figures were : Asquith, Lib. 2863. Boyd Kinnear, Dissentient Lib. 2487. The constituency was faithful to him for thirty-two years. At the "Coupon" election of 1918 it rejected him and for the first time in its history returned a Conservative. He was invited a year or two later to stand again, and it is pretty certain that if he had, East Fife would have returned to her old allegiance. But he had accepted her earlier decision as final, and preferred the "dark and difficult adventure" of Paisley.

1886-1890  
Age 33-37

It is perhaps worth recalling some features of the Parliamentary stage on which Asquith made his début. The Parliament of 1886-1892 was in high degree dramatic and *mouvementé*. Before Asquith had made his maiden speech the political world was convulsed by the portent of Lord Randolph Churchill's resignation and its acceptance by Lord Salisbury. Until the 23rd December, 1886, the stars in their courses had fought to promote and illuminate Lord Randolph's fortunes. In the course of little more than half a dozen years in Parliament he had bearded and brushed aside everyone who had stood in his path. He had assailed Mr. Gladstone with fearless irreverence, captured the Tory Caucus for a time from Lord Salisbury, driven Sir Stafford Northcote from the House of Commons, become a Secretary of State at thirty-six, and at thirty-seven Leader of the House. A single miscalculation, one gambler's throw after the run of luck had stopped, arrested, and eventually extinguished this extraordinary career. Lord Randolph was a formidable man, and could when he chose be very rude; but he reserved the asperities of his tongue for his contemporaries or seniors. To the younger men in politics and to Asquith in this Parliament he was easy of access and uniformly kind. More than once he attended the annual dinners at the "Blue Posts," a tavern to which Haldane and Asquith had the temerity to invite some of the leading men in politics and letters during this Parliament. In 1891 he discussed his resignation with Asquith, and it is perhaps worth noting that on this occasion he attributed it (as he generally did) to his error in "forgetting Goschen." "When I resigned, I should have beaten Lord Salisbury, as I confidently expected to do, but for their being able to fall back on Goschen." When, in 1895, he passed from the scene, Asquith took the chair at one of the farewell dinners given to him.

1886-1890  
Age 33-37

Whatever its cause, Lord Randolph's demission had two consequences of immediate moment. The first was to present the Government with its first Liberal Unionist recruit in Goschen. The other consequence was that short-lived but interesting experiment, the "Round Table." Chamberlain's Toryward drift had been rendered endurable to his radical heart and conscience so long as the inventor of Tory democracy occupied a key position in the councils of the Government. With Lord Randolph's eclipse and the prospect of reaction untempered by the restraints which he alone could impose, Chamberlain's mood veered to one of conciliation with the Gladstonians. And early in 1887 Harcourt called the famous Round Table Conference (consisting of Harcourt, Morley, Chamberlain, Trevelyan, and Herschell) at his house to explore and smooth the path of reunion. At first the experiment prospered: but the action of the participants outside the council chamber made its continuance impossible. Chamberlain did not cease on the platform to vituperate the Irish: Morley retaliated, and finally a violent onslaught by the former, in the *Baptist*, on both Irish and Gladstonians gave conciliation its quietus.

Meanwhile Irish affairs continued practically to monopolise the time of Parliament. Asquith's speeches in these years were practically all concerned with Ireland: and as the occasion of his maiden speech was the Government's reversion to a policy of repression, the steps by which it so reverted may be briefly recalled. In September 1886 a Tenants' Relief Bill providing for the downward revision of judicial rents had been introduced by Parnell. Owing, *inter alia*, to a severe fall in prices, tenants could not hope to pay their existing rents in the winter immediately impending. The chain of consequences Parnell foresaw and feared was evictions, crime, coercion. The Bill was thrown out. A Commission appointed by the Government reported in February 1887 in favour of the remedy it had rejected and Ministers, after a comic succession of marches and counter-marches, found that if they were to retain their supporters among the Ulster peasantry they must concede, at all events for a time, the principle of a general revision of judicial rents, a process which they had denounced shortly before as "laying the axe at the roots of civilised society." Meanwhile, ten months had been wasted and during them what Parnell apprehended had occurred. Evictions had provoked the "Plan of Campaign" (launched, according to Parnell, without his sanction and against his wishes, at a time when he was ill) whereby tenants tendered such reduced rents as they thought fair in full satisfaction of the landlord's claims, and,



*Wattmough Webster, Chester*

H. H. A.  
(1889)





upon the inevitable rejection of the tender, contributed the money to a fund for the relief of the evicted. The "Plan of Campaign" was a general agreement to break contracts. Whether such an agreement constitutes a criminal conspiracy or not, it was a form of lawlessness, and afforded, along with a certain outcrop of undoubted crime, a pretext to the Government to reintroduce Coercion. 1886-1890  
Age 33-37

The task of reintroducing it devolved on a new Chief Secretary, for Sir M. Hicks-Beach, whose eyes had been giving him trouble, had been succeeded in this office by Mr. Arthur Balfour. As a member of the Fourth party and as a minor Minister in the present Government, Mr. Balfour had betrayed little of his real quality: he was conceived as a charming, but rather spineless, trifler, drifting with lazy grace in a metaphysical cloudland. This conception was now rudely displaced. Almost from the first the new Irish Secretary showed himself an administrator of ruthless tenacity and a debater supple, steely, and dexterous beyond all expectation. For five years he courted the attack of the whole Irish party, and encountered with composure its combined debating strength. Gladstone had coerced the Irish with a wry face and a reluctant will. Mr. Balfour did so with a seeming levity and cold gusto, which at once exasperated and astounded the Home Rulers.

He it was who now introduced the new Crimes Bill, in some ways a more drastic measure than that of 1881. In particular it was put forward not as an emergency measure with a time limit, but as a permanent engine of Irish government. Secondly it contained, as originally drafted, a provision permitting Irish offenders to be deported to London and tried at the Old Bailey. The provision, though later dropped, is eloquent of the spirit in which the measure was conceived. Under its provisions practically anything could be made unlawful by proclamation.

Asquith's maiden speech was made in the course of a debate on the motion of W. H. Smith (Leader of the House) that the Crimes Bill should have precedence of other business. One or two excerpts will give a notion of its quality. He dealt boldly with the argument that Gladstone had practised coercion:

"I, for one, do not believe in the plenary infallibility of Liberal Governments. Though I am a loyal member of my party and a faithful follower of my leader, I do not think that the fact that the Liberal Government of 1881 committed what I conceive to be a colossal and disastrous mistake, is any reason why we, under the guidance of a Conservative Ministry, should repeat the blunder. It is admitted that, looking at Ireland as a whole, there has been, during the last six months,

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less serious crime, whether open or secret, than in almost any corresponding period of her troubled history. What crime there has been, is confined to a comparatively limited area in a few counties in the South and West. In those counties we find another phenomenon. It is in those counties that abatements of rent have been most generally refused. It is in those counties that evictions have been most exceptionally frequent in number and most grave and cruel in their character. It is in those counties that the standard of rents, judged by the reductions made by the Land Commissioners in the course of the last few months, has been abnormally high. As to the prevalence of crime, having regard to these admitted facts, I say deliberately, that this is a manufactured crisis. We know by experience how a case for coercion is made out. The panicmongers of the Press—gentlemen to whom every political combination is a conspiracy, and to whom every patriot is a rebel—were the first in the field, and have been most effectively assisted on the present occasion on the other side of the Channel, by the purveyors of loyal fiction and patriotic hysterics, wholesale, retail, and for exportation. The truth, whatever truth there is in the stories, is deliberately distorted and exaggerated. Atrocities are fabricated to meet the requirements of the market with punctuality, and when the home supply fails, the imagination of the inventive journalist wings its flight across the Atlantic and he sets to work to piece together the stale gossip of drinking saloons in New York and Chicago, and ekes it out with cuttings from obscure organs of the dynamite press.

The really grave symptoms in Ireland are the existence of boycotting and the indisposition of juries to convict prisoners.

Do hon. members imagine that by the legislation which Her Majesty's Government are going to propose, they will be able to transmute the social atmosphere in which these people live and which renders such treatment of them possible? Suppose we enlarge the powers of the magistrates; suppose we deprive the jurors of their share in the administration of the law; suppose we make punishments more severe; do you imagine that in that way you will increase the disposition of the peasantry of Ireland to come forward and give evidence? Not even a drumhead court-martial can convict without testimony proving the guilt of the accused. The difficulty which we have to provide for, is the difficulty which arises from the fact that the great mass of the population in Ireland are alienated from the law and have no sympathy with its administration. We are not unfamiliar in this country with the very state of things which exists in Ireland. There is nothing novel in the symptoms. . . . They have been witnessed in every country, whenever the state of the law has not been in harmony with the wishes of the people. . . .

It is truly an extraordinary thing that at this time of day, the Government, dealing with a well-known form of social and political disease, should come to the House and repeat the catchwords of the Metternichs and Castlereachs as if they were the latest discoveries of political science.



ARTHUR,

HERBERT,

(About 1890)

*W E Debenham, Haverstock Hill, N W.*

VIOLET, AND RAYMOND ASQUITH



The Chancellor of the Exchequer not long ago, with what was then his habitual caution, declined to give a blank cheque to Lord Salisbury. I think that we might profit by the right hon. gentleman's example, and, the liberties of a nation being at stake, reasonably decline to honour this very serious draft upon our political belief. I quite understand that there are hon. members near me who take a very different view of the matter. Those hon. members are compelled by the circumstances of their position to make a display of faith which a very short time ago they would have been the first to ridicule and condemn. It is, perhaps, excusable in them, that under the stress of compromising memories—memories of the days when they were wont to declare that 'force is no remedy'; memories of the days, still more recent, when they denounced the wickedness of the Irish landlords and the more than foolish abominations of Castle rule—it was, perhaps, excusable in them that they should clutch at any pretext, however desperate, which might seem to reconcile their present with their past. I do not know now who is the casuist of the Liberal Unionist Party. In that compact and complete organisation I feel sure that a place must have been found for a director of consciences. Whoever he is, his time must just now be pretty well occupied. But as for the poor Separatists, the 'intellectual scum of what was once the Liberal Party,' they may be thankful that they have not to exercise their faculties in the attempt to explain how they can vote for a Coercion Bill, in the hope that some day or other, in some way or other, remedial measures may be introduced.

1886-1890  
Age 33-37

In the course which the party opposite are about to take are they not either going too far or not going far enough? Consider what will be the position of Ireland, the condition of government in that country under the system which you are about to introduce—representative institutions upon the terms that the voice of the great majority of the representatives of the people shall be systematically ignored and overridden; the right of public meeting tempered by Viceregal proclamation; trial by jury with a doctored and manipulated panel; a free Press, subject to be muzzled at the will of officials; judges and magistrates, by their traditions independent of the Crown, but in practice and in theory of their office inextricably mixed up with the action of the Executive. What conceivable advantage can there be either to Ireland or to Great Britain from the continuance of this gross caricature of the British Constitution? There is much virtue in government of the people, by the people, for the people. There is much also to be said for a powerful and well-equipped autocracy, but between the two, there is no logical or statesmanlike halting-place.

For the hybrid system which the Government is about to set up, a system which pretends to be that which it is not, and is not what it pretends to be, a system which cannot be either resolutely repressive or frankly popular—for this half-hearted compromise there is inevitably reserved the inexorable sentence which history shows must fall on every form of political imposture."

(House of Commons, 24th March, 1887.)

. . . . .

1886-1890  
Age 33-37

The speech was highly successful. Its combative acerbity delighted the Irish. Mr. Gladstone had heard Asquith speak before at some function of the Eighty Club. The high estimate he formed of the earlier performance was confirmed by the present speech. The House was impressed by its argumentative cogency and literary finish, and hardly less by the authoritative tone with which it was delivered. Here was no fumbling novice or promising amateur, but a seasoned fighter, sure, with an assurance which usually experience alone can beget, of his case, his audience, and himself. It was often said of Asquith afterwards that he was never a member of the rank and file. From the start he assumed the manner of a front bencher and the House accepted him at his own valuation.

The Bill was carried with the help of the Liberal Unionists, including Joseph Chamberlain, the arch-enemy of coercion in days when the condition of Ireland had been worse. In this matter, as in so many others, Chamberlain did nothing by halves. His temperament abhorred the fence and the hedge. If he could no longer be the one thing, he must be flatly and whole-heartedly the other.

So began "twenty years of resolute government."

Two other incidents in 1887 brought Asquith prominently into public notice.

On 25th May he wrote a letter to *The Times* defending the extrusion from the Eighty Club of its Liberal Unionist members. In the interests of these last, and of Chamberlain in particular, a resolution had been proposed that the guests of the Club should not be limited to either section of the Liberal Party. To this resolution an amendment was moved, and carried by a great majority, committing the Club to the propagation of Home Rule, and inferentially barring the return of the arch-rebel and his followers. Chamberlain, Hartington, Goschen, and Bright thereupon resigned. Complaints of proscription and excommunication were in the air. Asquith temperately, but with firmness, defended the action of the Club. "The choice lay," he wrote, "between the loss of valuable members and the complete paralysis of the Club. We delayed making it as long as we could, but the occasion was forced on us at last by the minority, and as we had to choose, I do not see how, having regard to the views of the majority and the objects of the Club, we could have done otherwise than we did."

He struck the same note later in the same year, in a speech at a meeting of the National Liberal Federation at Nottingham (18th October, 1887). Moving a resolution of confidence in the policy of

1886-1890  
Age 33-37

Home Rule, he said that speaking as a very humble member of the party, he thought the limits of reasonable concession (to the Liberal Unionists) had been reached. Henry IV had thought Paris was "worth a mass": but they might pay too high a price for the capitulation of Birmingham. He concluded with a notable tribute to Mr. Gladstone, "whose presence at our head is worth a hundred battalions. To the youngest it is an inspiration, to the oldest an example, to one and all a living lesson of devotion, hopefulness, and vitality. Let us rejoice that one survivor of the heroic age of English politics has entered on the last struggle of a life spent on the battlefields of freedom: and let us, lesser men of a later day, be proud that in such an enterprise and under such omens we are permitted to obey his summons and follow when he leads."

This discourse was addressed to a wider audience and created a greater splash than his maiden speech in Parliament. Harcourt wrote to his wife: "Asquith made a really remarkable speech, on which I greatly complimented him. It was the only speech of the afternoon." John Morley referred to it as "eloquent and powerful." This effort strengthened his claim to the high place which he was soon to occupy in the councils of the party. His activities for the next two years, both in Parliament and outside it, centred in the Parnell Commission, which deserves a chapter to itself.



## CHAPTER V

### THE PARNELL COMMISSION

Parnellism and Crime"—Appointment of the Commission—Asquith protests against the enlarged scope of the Inquiry—Is briefed as junior to Sir Charles Russell on behalf of Parnell—Sensational cross-examination of Mr. Simon Macdonald—His name as an advocate made—Parnell's debacle and death—Asquith's impressions and estimate of Parnell. C. A.

1888-1890  
Age 35-37

IF any rule can be said to have applied to the Irish movement, it is that its course and fortunes were determined by circumstances entirely unrelated to its merits. A good illustration of the working of this rule is afforded by the fact that the assassins who diverted the course of Irish history by murdering Lord F. Cavendish apparently did not know who he was. The years 1887-1891 were to furnish further and classic examples of its operation. The cause of Home Rule was powerfully advanced by proof that Mr. Parnell had not been guilty of condoning a murder, and sustained a crucial set-back from the discovery (an open secret much earlier to all who mattered) that he had been guilty of living with a married woman.

The story is too well worn to bear re-telling, save in the briefest summary. In early 1887 *The Times* published a series of articles under the heading "Parnellism and Crime." The burden of these articles was that the Land League had fostered crime and outrage in Ireland. On 18th April—the morning of the day on which the second reading division on the Crimes Bill was to be taken—*The Times* published a letter signed ostensibly by Parnell (though the body of the letter was in a different hand). The letter, a photograph of which appears on page 64, was in these terms :

15/5/82.

DEAR SIR,

I am not surprised at your friend's anger but he and you should know that to denounce the murders was the only course open to us. To do so promptly was plainly our best policy.

But you can tell him and all others concerned that though I regret the accident of Lord F. Cavendish's death I cannot refuse to admit that Burke got no more than his deserts.

You are at liberty to show him this, and others whom you can trust 1888-1890  
also, but let not my address be known. He can write to House of Age 35-37  
Commons.

Yours very truly,  
CHAS. S. PARNELL.

*The Times* expressed no doubt as to the authenticity of the letter, and confidently alleged that it was addressed to Patrick Egan, a notorious dynamiter. Its plain meaning was that Parnell had expressed sympathy with the Phoenix Park murders.

Parnell instantly (but in oddly guarded terms) repudiated the letter as a fabrication. His *démenti* was received with cool amused disbelief in the highest Conservative circles. Lord Salisbury, assuming the truth of *The Times*' allegations as beyond question, described Mr. Gladstone as linked to an ally "tainted with the strong presumption of conniving at assassination" (20th April, 1887); bold words from one who had so lately profited by an electoral alliance with the Irish Leader.

Yet the Conservative Party cannot be really blamed for their attitude in this matter. If they treated with strange disrespect the notion that an accused person is "presumed" to be innocent, yet the standing and reputation of *The Times* made what ultimately turned out to be the truth quite incredible at the time, and for a year afterwards Parnell's omission to vindicate himself by taking proceedings against the paper lent some colour to the cynical assumptions of his opponents. He thought that a jury, whether English or Irish, would be too prejudiced to reach an unanimous verdict, or to carry any moral weight even if it did. Another Irish Nationalist M.P., Mr. Hugh O'Donnell, ignoring these considerations, had sued *The Times* for libel. *The Times* contended (1) that its imputations did not relate to him; (2) that they were true. O'Donnell withdrew that part of his case which concerned charges in which he was not named. On the two relatively unimportant charges in which he was named, the jury found against him. Thus in the main the case failed to decide the issues on which Mr. O'Donnell had gone to law. Yet the Attorney-General (Sir R. Webster), who appeared for *The Times*, in accordance with the rule which, in those days, permitted a Law Officer to appear for a private litigant, improved the occasion by producing a whole body of new letters and accusations, the first of which he declared he could prove to be genuine, and the second well-founded.

Parnell alleged these letters also to be forgeries. To test this question he asked for a Select Committee. This the Government

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refused, but offered in its place (16th July, 1888) a Statutory Commission of Judges to inquire, not merely into the only issue Parnell had raised, namely, the genuineness of the letters and his connection with the Phoenix Park outrages, but also into all the allegations and charges made in *The Times* articles, not only against Parnell, but against M.P.'s "and other persons." In other words, the Government proposed to entrust a tribunal of their own choosing with a roving commission to see if any evidence could be found to support against any member of the Parnellite party—or indeed anybody else—any one of the multitudinous imputations and innuendoes in any of *The Times* articles. The Government indicated that this was an offer which could be taken or left, but would not be modified; and proceeded to select (and embody in their Bill the names of) three Judges, one of whom was suspected—rightly or wrongly—of strong bias against the persons incriminated. The Opposition protested in vain against this procedure, but as their view, and Parnell's by this time, was that any inquiry was better than none, they had perforce to accept what was offered them. Two points in particular were selected for attack by Asquith in the House of Commons. On the 30th July, 1888, he criticised the way in which the Commission had been constituted. Why had not the Government negotiated privately with the Opposition concerning its personnel? Three Judges acceptable to both parties could easily have been found. As it was, the Government had forced the Opposition to the alternative either of accepting any tribunal, however objectionable to them, or of canvassing the qualifications of the Judges in public.<sup>1</sup> On the 7th August he followed this up by the reasonable demand that particulars of the charges should be formulated before the inquiry began. The Commission should not have to deal with a mass of ambiguous innuendoes.<sup>2</sup> This demand was in the main conceded by the Commission at its first meeting. The Bill constituting the Commission passed in August 1888.

On 17th September, 1888, the Commission sat for the first time, to discuss procedure. Between then and 22nd November, 1889, its sittings continued, occupying in all 129 working days. Over five hundred witnesses were called. Asquith was briefed as junior Counsel with Sir Charles Russell as leader, on behalf of Parnell.

The Attorney-General and Sir H. James (afterwards Lord James of Hereford) appeared amongst others for *The Times*, and Mr. Robert Reid (afterwards Lord Loreburn) for twenty-one incriminated Irish members.

<sup>1</sup> Hansard, Vol. 329, p. 792.

<sup>2</sup> Hansard, Vol. 329, p. 1882.

The proceedings, which from first to last occupied over a year, were compounded in extremely unequal proportion of thrill and tedium. Everyone knew that the Commission would never have been appointed but for the alleged forgeries. Unwarrantably (in the view of many) though the Commission's province had been extended, these and nothing else were its true *raison d'être* and the sole branch of its investigations for which public opinion cared a rush. The crucial question of the origin of these letters was bound to be raised at some stage. *The Times* Counsel, without knowing that the letters were forgeries, knew that they had been obtained from Pigott, a needy blackmailer of the inkiest antecedents; and as early in the inquiry as the 11th November, 1888, they had had a letter from Pigott saying in effect that he would make a bad witness.<sup>1</sup> They sought, therefore, by every means in their power to postpone the investigation of the source of the letters (and the consequent appearance of Pigott in the box) till the eleventh hour: and to employ the intervening months in an attempt to build up an overwhelming case against the Land League as a mere cloak and pretext for crime. When sentiment had been thoroughly inflamed against the Nationalists, they could afford to expose the weaker cards in their own hand. The unfortunate pedigree of the letters could then be disclosed with an effect less damaging to their clients' interests and less favourable to those of the Parnellites, than would otherwise be possible. Parnell and his Counsel, on the other hand, knew before the proceedings started that the letters had not only been obtained from Pigott but forged by Pigott. Their cue was to elicit these matters at the earliest moment. But in this they were not wholly successful. For the first five months the inquiry ranged over the chosen ground of the Attorney-General. At last, by February 1889, Sir Richard Webster had exhausted all the powder and shot, available on these issues, which even his capacious magazines contained. An attempt still further to postpone the evil day by interposing the evidence of handwriting experts was thwarted, and on 20th February Pigott was called by *The Times*. In telling his advocates that he would be discredited, the poor man had spoken well within the truth. The feeblest advocate at the Bar, armed with Russell's dossier, could have scarified him, and Russell was the greatest cross-examiner of his time. The two days during which the miserable wretch was raked and pounded by Sir Charles' merciless batteries were more painful

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<sup>1</sup> This letter, as Asquith pointed out in the House of Commons, was not disclosed until Pigott was actually in the box, when it was produced in compliance with a demand in cross-examination which could not be resisted. (Hansard, Vol. 339, p. 750.)

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than exciting. The victim, unable to face a third, wrote a confession, fled to Spain, and killed himself when on the point of arrest. *The Times* withdrew the letters, and Parnell's vindication, on the only issue on which he had challenged an inquiry, was complete.

The only matter which still interested the general body of spectators was how *The Times* had ever come to put forward the letters as genuine. On this issue they called their manager, Mr. Simon Macdonald. The world expected him to unfold a tale of business-like vigilance frustrated either by some freak of chance or by some exhibition of satanic and serpentine guile. This expectation was dramatically disappointed. Asquith has told how after Macdonald's evidence in chief, Russell complained of lassitude and said, "You must deal with this fellow," overbearing the modest remonstrances of his junior. Asquith accordingly dealt with him. The witness at first took an aggressive line; he "answered back"; but his interrogator was not to be ruffled, brow-beaten, or side-tracked. For an hour or two the stream of cool, deadly questions flowed on, damaging admissions piled up; the witness's firm front yielded, and soon he was in full retreat. The retreat became a rout. Before the cross-examination had finished, the victim stood exposed on the view most favourable to him, as an exemplar of childlike and abysmal credulity. When Asquith sat down, to be overwhelmed with praise by his leader, he was, so far as the Bar was concerned, a made man. His practice jumped a dozen rungs, and within a year he took Silk with a confidence which was fully justified by the event. Yet in spite of the magical wand which this day's work had passed over his own fortunes, he consistently maintained that the Parnell Commission was, as a whole, far and away the most tedious experience of his life. So little could any episode, however vitally it affected his career, disturb his balance or benumb an unsleeping capacity for boredom.

The Commission meanwhile, like a wounded snake, dragged its slow length along. It reported in February 1890. Its findings on the letters were inevitable and foreseen; its conclusions on the wider and vaguer questions a matter of relative indifference, though not of unimportance, since it acquitted the Land League of the main charge brought against that body—that of complicity in "every agrarian murder which had occurred over a period of three years." On a few counts it pronounced against the incriminated M.P.s. But no one was surprised or much shocked to learn that the Nationalists had not always denounced disorder with unqualified fervour, or even that seven of them had joined the Land League

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with the object of promoting "Separation." The Government pressed these thin bandages to its wounds without materially stanching them. It moved, in the debate which followed, that the Report be adopted. Three features illuminated an otherwise drab debate. In almost the last speech which recalled his earlier quality, Lord Randolph Churchill savagely hammered the Government for constituting a modern Star Chamber. "Pigott! Pigott! Pigott!" was his cry with menacing finger pointed at the front bench. Mr. Gladstone spoke eloquently in support of an amendment that the House should record its reprobation of the foul charges of which Parnell had been acquitted. Asquith, on the same amendment, made a bitter and vehement attack, backed with all the weight of his intimate knowledge, on the Attorney-General's conduct of the proceedings before the Commission. It affords some measure of the prestige the speaker had acquired after less than four years in Parliament, that *The Times* not only reported this speech verbatim, but devoted a whole leading article to the task of answering it. But Parnell's triumph had been too decisive and achieved too many months ago for the voices of his apologists to excite passionate interest. They seemed to be flogging a dead horse. No one on either side realised how soon the horse would revive, refreshed and strengthened by a spell of sleep.

An acute eye might have foreseen these blighting developments. Nearly three months before the Commission reported, Captain O'Shea had cited Parnell as co-respondent in his suit for divorce. In the inner circles of politics Parnell's association with Mrs. O'Shea had for years been common knowledge, and the cataclysmic effects which followed its revelation to a wider public supply a pretty text for critics of the moral hypocrisy of our race. When the suit came to trial on 15th November, 1890, Parnell did not defend. But the existence of a cross-petition forced a disclosure in Court of the whole story. Two or three days later a decree was granted to the petitioner. Parnell had outwardly treated this event with studied insouciance; a strange miscalculation for a man who was, above all, a "realist," led him to think it would be a "nine days' wonder," and no more. A great meeting of the National Liberal Federation meanwhile was due to be held on 20th November at Sheffield, and Mr. Gladstone had to decide what his attitude should be. His instinct was to do nothing. He obstinately eschewed the role of moral censor.<sup>1</sup> The probable reactions of the Nonconformist conscience on the Irish cause which alone now interested him, determined his policy. If

<sup>1</sup> Though a voice in the "interior forum" whispered, "It'll na dee." (Morley.)

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Parnell continued to lead the Irish, Home Rule would lose the effective support of the bulk of Liberals, or enough of that support to make its passage impossible. Lord Morley has recorded the letter which Mr. Gladstone wrote to him in this sense, to be passed on to Parnell; a letter, the pith of which (amid much considerate circumlocution) was that Parnell's continued leadership of his forces would, in the existing state of public opinion, "reduce Mr. Gladstone's leadership of the Liberals to a nullity." He has told how the Irish leader, *more suo*, evaded service of this letter; vanished into thin air, and only reappeared a minute or two before the meeting of the Irish Party convened to elect its sessional chairman; how the message was then hurriedly delivered to Parnell, and by him deliberately withheld from his colleagues; and how they, in their innocence, proceeded to re-elect him to the chair of the party.

Asquith played in these proceedings the part of a spectator only. He had, however, met Parnell, as his Counsel, two or three times a week for the best part of a year. His judgment, if on this ground only, is not without value. One impression he had formed—that Parnell, with all his transcendent acuteness in some matters, lacked in others a grasp of the obvious—is confirmed and illustrated by the Irish leader's conduct in the present crisis. Instead of retiring, for a time at least, and allowing the English Nonconformists and the Irish Catholics an opportunity of recovering their breath, he determined to brazen things out, and fought like a demon to retain his position. He even tried to brand Mr. Gladstone as a backslider and a renegade from the Irish cause, and to pose, for his own part, as the martyr of British treachery and puritanism. Day after day Committee Room 15 (the same in which Chamberlain had assassinated the first Home Rule Bill) reverberated with this unseemly conflict. His inevitable defeat almost turned his brain, and certainly precipitated his death. About twenty-six of the party, led by John Redmond, remained faithful to him. (Asquith shocked his friends by saying he would have been one of them.) Forty-four voted against him. Parnell turned to Ireland and wore himself to shreds in propagating his cause at by-elections. It was of no avail. At Kilkenny, at Carlow, at Sligo his candidates were defeated. The country for which he had laboured so hugely disowned him. In his forty-sixth year, exhausted by his exertions, he died (7th October, 1891).<sup>1</sup>

Asquith often commented on the paradoxes of Parnell's career.

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Smith died the same day.

10/5/02

Dear Sir,

I am not surprised at your friends  
anger but he and you should know  
that to denounce the murders was  
the only course open to us. So as  
that promptly and plainly, showing  
our best feeling.

But you can tell him and all  
others concerned that though I regret  
the accident of Lord & Carnell's  
death I cannot refuse to admit  
that Charles got no more than his  
share.

We are all sorry to show  
that and when you can find  
the best fit with my feelings as  
a man, I am sure to know of it.

Yours very truly  
Chas. J. Parnell

(10340.)  
(704)





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That the leadership of a national movement on behalf of a Catholic peasantry should have fallen to a Protestant, a landlord, and a complete disbeliever in democracy was odd enough ; but it was no less extraordinary that such a movement should be carried to the verge of success by a leader of intellectual limitations so marked. Notwithstanding their frequent contacts, Asquith never heard him " say a good thing." He was densely superstitious, refusing to enter a room in which three candles were burning. He astounded Mr. Gladstone by his ignorance of the rudiments (*inter alia*) of Irish history. Indeed, beyond the elements of metallurgy, there was very little he knew at all. Asquith, during his association with Parnell, suffered comparatively little from the " glacial reserve " which at once froze and fascinated the great man's followers, but was fond of recalling incidents and stories of which it was the theme. The following episode recorded by Mr. Barry O'Brien is an example : In 1883 £40,000 was collected for the Irish Leader. A Mayor, who was to make the presentation to the Chief, visibly itched to accompany it with a few words of encomium. Parnell cut him short with two questions : " I think you have a cheque for me ? " " Is it drawn to order and crossed ? " And after receiving satisfactory assurances on these points, firmly closed the interview. Asquith himself was present on the occasion when Parnell first entered the House after his vindication and the whole Liberal Party in the Commons, from its octogenarian leader down, remained standing in token of their respect for him, and witnessed the complete disregard with which Parnell treated this unexampled demonstration. His followers seem to have relished rather than resented the studied want of consideration with which he treated them on almost all occasions. So stark an inhumanity stamped its possessor, like the Aristotelean man who loved solitude, as a god or a beast. His fine presence and carriage, together with his unbroken record of practical success, inclined them to the first alternative, and their submission and homage followed.

In a memorandum written a few days after Parnell's death (October 1891) Asquith says :

" We talked of his character. Mr. G. is all for forgetting the last ten months, and ranks him with Grattan and O'Connell. M." (John Morley) " thinks this estimate too high : something mesquin in his character. I on the contrary contended that, looking at him as a force in the world, it was too low : that judging by the results clearly traceable to one man's initiative, by the *dead-heave* given, he was one of the three or four men of the century. M. was inclined to agree. We agreed that he was

1888-1890 infamously treated by his own tail in Committee Room 15, and after . . .  
Age 35-37 he was a man !”

Another disclosure in the same document is worth recording. In September 1888, Parnell told Asquith it was a mistake to suppose that Coercion would be futile. The Irish would yield to it if it were continuously enforced. His object had always been “not to fight but to prevent coercion.”

The same estimate of Parnell appears in a letter to Lady (then Mrs.) Horner, written a few years later :

“Did you know Parnell ? I did ; that is, at one time I saw a great deal of him in confidential intercourse and in some critical situations. I was a Parnellite—latterly in a sneaking kind of way—up to the end. With all his limitations, and in spite of the incredible stupidities both in calculation and in conduct which he from time to time committed, I think he will be reckoned one of the great personal forces of this century. There is no English-speaking country in which the course of things has not been for the time, and perhaps permanently modified by the fact that he existed. Of how many men can that be said ? For us Home Rulers his *Manes* will be almost as formidable as Mr. G.’s will (some day) be useful. Personality is still the most potent factor in the world, and as long as some men die at forty-five and others live to be ninety, political prophecy will be a fond and futile art.”

It is indeed a fascinating, if idle, speculation what the course of our politics would have been if Parnell and Lord Randolph Churchill had enjoyed the ordinary human span. They would both have lived into the Great War.

## CHAPTER VI

### SOME CHEQUERED YEARS

A Parliamentary group—Haldane, Grey, Acland, Buxton—Asquith an infrequent speaker in Parliament—Growth of his reputation as a debater—Morley as patron and mentor—Expansion of Asquith's social Circle—Death of Helen Asquith. C. A.

As far back as 1882 Asquith had formed the acquaintance of Mr. R. B. (later Viscount) Haldane. Both were barristers of Lincoln's Inn, both were Liberals, both lacked private fortunes, both were ambitious. Both were strenuous and articulate members of the Eighty Club, of which Haldane had been the first Honorary Secretary. Not long after their first meeting, Haldane, most uncharacteristically, fell ill. He recuperated at Asquith's house in Hampstead, at which, thenceforward, he was a constant and warmly welcomed visitor (not least by the children, whom he loaded with presents). Thus was laid the keel of a lifelong friendship, possibly the closest Asquith had with any man.

Haldane, like Grey, though a few years younger than Asquith, entered Parliament some months before him, in November 1885. When Asquith joined them, in July 1886, the three men gravitated together. Along with Sidney Buxton,<sup>1</sup> Ronald Ferguson,<sup>2</sup> "Tom" Ellis, and some others, they came to form a coherent parliamentary team of young Liberals, acting politically in concert and close alliance. The most experienced member of this group, and perhaps its moving spirit, was A. H. D. Acland,<sup>3</sup> whose name is still remembered as the successful Minister for Education in Mr. Gladstone's 1892 Government. Mr. Gladstone's absorption in Ireland left a wide field (the Newcastle programme being still to come) for the thoughtful initiative of a body of keen young men bent on social and domestic reform. Into this field the group plunged with ardour, surveying and parcelling out the ground, exchanging ideas, and formulating conclusions somewhat in the spirit of a modern "summer school." These conclusions were often tinged with a

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<sup>1</sup> Afterwards, Earl Buxton.

<sup>2</sup> Afterwards, Viscount Novar.

<sup>3</sup> Afterwards, Sir Arthur Acland.

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rather advanced radicalism, and the members of the group, notably Haldane and Grey, cultivated an independence of action which did not always endear them to the Whips. Asquith's gift of speech was recognised from the start, and marked him out, when the group had worked up a really strong case, as the man to present it in the House of Commons.

Two of them—Haldane and Asquith—adventured beyond parliamentary co-operation. Once a year they gave a dinner at a now demolished tavern in a mews off Cork Street, the "Blue Posts." To this lowly hostel they invited on each occasion four leading politicians, and four men eminent in other spheres. Sir A. West in his *Diaries*, page 19, recalls one of these meetings. "Present, amongst others, Arthur Balfour, Morley, Carson, Edward Grey, Bowen (Lord Justice). Discussion as to who should succeed Tennyson as Laureate. Asquith was in favour of the office being suspended. Arthur Balfour for Swinburne as successor. Bowen for Bridges."<sup>1</sup> Lord Haldane in his Autobiography mentions an occasion when the guests included Rosebery, Chamberlain, and Randolph Churchill, Burne-Jones, Russell Lowell, and Alfred Lyall. Chamberlain seems on this occasion to have joined unequally, and somewhat to their annoyance, in an animated dialectical duel between Rosebery and Lord Randolph Churchill, with the result that the latter, who combined with more amiable qualities a combustible asperity, told a waiter to put a flower-pot between Chamberlain and himself. Such brushes were rare. As a rule, "Blue Posts" provided a stimulating but harmonious clash.

During these years Asquith spoke frequently in the country, sparingly in the House of Commons. In 1899 he aroused the facile wrath of Sir W. Harcourt (in whose good graces he had stood high hitherto, and was to stand high hereafter) by a platform appeal to the Leaders of the party to divulge at least the main lines of the Home Rule scheme they contemplated introducing if returned to power. "If," wrote Harcourt to Morley (October 1889), "we have the sense to keep our own counsel, they may hammer at us in vain, but if we allow ourselves to be engaged in the morasses of the 'Irish Members at Westminster,' we shall be routed horse and foot." (Gardiner, ii, p. 148.) Morley and Gladstone were clearly in favour of a judicious reticence. In January 1890 Harcourt recurs to his theme, with increased acidity. "Our young men like E. Grey, who

<sup>1</sup> Sir Edward (now Lord) Grey was the first to bring the existence of Robert Bridges to the knowledge of Asquith, at this actual party. It will be remembered that it was Asquith who some decades later appointed him Laureate.

can speak, won't. Asquith, *who will never do a day's work for us in the House*, goes about the country, doing mischief, and gladdening the hearts of the Unionists and P.M.G." (Gardiner, ii, p. 152.) It appears that Asquith about this time had incensed the sensitive "Little-Englandism" of Harcourt by joining the "Imperial League." The resentment of the tribune of the people was, as often, short-lived—the "flash and outbreak of a fiery mind." But it serves to call attention to two things. First, Asquith's practice at the Bar, which was beginning to swell to gratifying dimensions, prevented him from devoting himself to such matters as Committee work in the House. Secondly, apart from this, his interventions in Parliamentary debate were puzzlingly rare. In the six years between his entrance into Parliament, and his accession, in 1892, to high Cabinet office, he cannot have spoken more than a dozen times, and many of his speeches were quite short. Charles James Fox, to someone who asked him how, from being the worst, he had become the best debater in the House, replied: "By speaking every night on every subject." Asquith's method, of which the results cannot be disputed, ran counter to this classic advice. He conserved and concentrated his resources: spoke seldom, timed his speeches in a masterly fashion, and saw to it that each of them should register a direct hit. The slenderness of his output threw its quality into relief, and conferred on each performance a "scarcity value." Irish affairs were mostly the occasion of his interventions. At long intervals he addressed himself to other themes. The following passage in a debate on the payment of members, is characteristic enough in its Johnsonian sanity to bear quotation. Government speakers have insisted on the mercenary element with which this proposal threatened the purity of the Legislature, he said:

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"Is it not time that in this matter we should clear our minds of cant? To listen to some language it might be supposed that no one enters the House of Commons but from a single-minded desire to serve his country, and that my hon. friend who moved the resolution is going for the first time, in this scene of Arcadian purity and simplicity, to open the door to a horde of self-seekers and place-hunters. Look at the Treasury Bench, or for that matter, at the Front Opposition Bench. . . . We see on the two Front Benches, conveniently concentrated, what I may call the flower of English statesmanship. I am sorry to raise a blush on the cheeks of right hon. gentlemen, but the truth is we are so much more in the habit of listening to them than they are of listening to us, that we rarely have the opportunity of letting them know the strength and fullness of our affectionate admiration. They are the men, who in the struggle for existence, have outpaced or trampled down all their competitors. Well, Sir, looking at these men, whose patriotism no one

1890-1892 will call in question, will any one of them get up and say that office—  
 Age 37-40 I do not of course mean the emoluments alone, but the power, the patronage, the visible authority of which office is the symbol—will any one of them get up and say that the chance of getting these things, the hope of keeping them, the fear of losing them, do not form a powerful motive in the political life of this country? . . . Then there are men who come here in the hopes of business or professional advancement, and even the men who are moved by the vulgarest form of vulgar ambition—the desire to get into what is called ‘Society.’ With all these forces at work . . . mixed, as I agree they are . . . with honest zeal for the public service, with which few of them are altogether inconsistent, can anyone seriously maintain that the adoption of this trivial proposition, for so it is, this proposition to allow a Member some £300 or £400 a year, would substantially add to the mercenary elements by which our public life is invaded?” (House of Commons, 29th March, 1889.)

The plea fell on deaf ears at the time. It was reserved for a Government of which he was the head to give effect to it a quarter of a century later.

The vigilant huge black orb of Mr. Gladstone, sweeping the benches of the House in search of rising talent, was soon attracted by Asquith’s debating power, and the man who then stood highest in the confidence of the Chief, viewed the group to which Asquith belonged with lively benevolence. The figure of John Morley, prominent at all times in letters, loomed larger on the purely political stage at this time than it did later. Subject possibly to the rivalry of Harcourt, he was, to Liberal eyes, the second man in the Commons. Unlike Harcourt, he was a political philosopher, and man of letters, and this, together with the access he enjoyed to the supreme oracle, gave him an unique position among Liberal politicians. Morley was at this time uncritically accepted and whole-heartedly admired by the young Liberal group, and admiration called forth the most generous response of which his nature was capable. If he sought and relished appreciation, he also ensued it. To Asquith’s colleagues he became a mentor, a sponsor, in matters political a guide, philosopher, and friend. The younger man’s own background of cultivation, and ability to meet him on equal terms on his own chosen ground—Mill, Spencer, the French ideologues and the like—made a special appeal to Morley. He wrote a little later (in 1893):

“The understanding between Asquith and me, from the intellectual and political point of view, is almost perfect. He is more close in expression than I am, but we both have in different ways the *esprit positif*. We are both of us optimists: we start from common educational training, though his was in the critical hours of education much better. . . . A truly satisfactory man!” (Morley, *Recollections*, Vol. I, 369, 373.)

Political divergence and a natural disharmony of temperament later declared themselves between the two and somewhat tempered the warmth of their mutual regard. The uncompromising decision not only of Asquith's views but of his manner of expressing them was apt to jar the shrinking, almost feminine sensibility of his senior; whose alternations, moreover, of mood from friendly to feline at first puzzled and ended by irritating him. As far back as 1894 Asquith innocently told Sir A. West that, for some reason he could not fathom, Morley had not spoken to him for three weeks. The reason may have lain in an episode which was to be repeated on many an occasion in the near future. Morley had probably been asked to discharge some Parliamentary task at short notice, and desiring longer preparation, had declined. Asquith, who could produce his best on the instant, had been invited to step into the breach and had scored a hit. It is certain that in later years Asquith's heavy but mobile artillery was often pressed into service for an emergency with which Morley, unable to wheel his slim polished guns into position in time, had declined to grapple. He would have been more than human if he had relished his relative eclipse in debate by a younger man of greater agility. But in this period—the period of Asquith's admiring apprenticeship—there was no rift between them. Their affinity, as Morley said, was perfect.

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The years 1890–1892 are from many points of view a memorable turning-point in Asquith's life. They mark a serious decline in the party's fortunes. The tide of by-elections, impelled forward by Parnell's vindication, had set for a time strongly in favour of the Liberals. When the divorce suit had divided the Nationalists and estranged many of their English supporters, that tide halted and dispiritingly ebbed. But Asquith's own fortunes were at their flood. Professionally and politically he leapt ahead. Socially his activities and horizons widened. He and his wife had until 1889 lived at Hampstead a life simple, retired, and self-sufficient. They had entertained, in a quiet unpretentious way, a few Oxford cronies of H.H.A., some political and professional colleagues whose mark was yet to make, a handful of neighbours—no one, as yet, prominent in the public eye or in the glass of fashion. The cramped pages of the little engagement books which Asquith kept all his life are full, during these years, of blanks. In the intervals of these blanks stand enisled a few pencilled entries, most of them of a mundane and practical character. They record professional appointments, purchases of gloves and umbrellas (an incredible number of both), lists of books read, here and there perhaps a visit to the theatre.



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From 1889 on, when he was moving swiftly and smoothly into the political limelight, there is a significant change in the number and nature of these entries. The pencil marks invade, and in a year or two swamp, the blanks. The small pages begin to bristle and teem with dining engagements. The personnel of these dinners, many of which are at the House of Commons, and a swelling percentage in private houses, is usually set out. Names which occur with increasing frequency are those of Arthur Balfour, Alfred Lyttelton, John Morley, Mrs. Horner,<sup>1</sup> Mr. and Mrs. William Grenfell,<sup>2</sup> Mr. Gladstone; Sir Charles Tennant and his daughters Margot, Charlotte Lady Ribblesdale, and Lucy Graham Smith, loom large. He is a constant visitor at the Tennants' house; they introduce him to new people—Harry Cust, George Curzon,<sup>3</sup> St. John Brodrick,<sup>4</sup> a host of others.

At these collations there is usually a strong contingent of politicians, of both parties: occasionally the function is purely political or purely social. It is plain that, in Asquith's sober phraseology, there is in progress a "transformation in the external conditions" of his life. A few years earlier his attitude towards "what is called Society" (one can hear the contemptuous inflexion) had been rather stern, if not a little narrow. In that phase, Haldane and he had observed, walking across the Horse Guards, the figure of John Bright. "There," he said to Haldane, "is the only man in public life who had risen to eminence without being corrupted by London Society." This severe and sweeping judgment (it would seem to include in its ban people like Mr. Gladstone) his own theory and practice were henceforward to qualify, if not to belie. From this time on he was in some sense "in Society." Some of his old friends shook their heads at this development, but probably their qualms were needless. In fundamentals Asquith belonged to no class and was affected by no environment. "Society," for instance, was to exercise less than no effect on his political action, when, after twenty years of its allurements, he invited and incurred its detestation by introducing the Parliament Bill.

In August 1891, Asquith took his wife and family to Lamash, in the Island of Arran. In the margin of the diary which he kept during this year (and fitfully for two or three years more) are inscribed the words *infelix atque infaustum iter*. On 11th September Helen Asquith, after three weeks' illness, died of typhoid, at the age of thirty-five. Let the laconic entries in the diary tell their story:

<sup>1</sup> Afterwards, Lady Horner.

<sup>2</sup> Afterwards, Lord and Lady Desborough.

<sup>3</sup> Afterwards, the Marquess Curzon of Kedleston.

<sup>4</sup> Afterwards, the Earl of Midleton.

Aug. 13.	Left for Lamlash.	1890-1892
Aug. 20 (Th.)	Bertie ill.	Age 37-40
Aug. 22 (Sat.)	Helen ill.	
Aug. 27 (Th.)	Dr. Finlayson called in.	
Aug. 28 (Fr.)	Josephine came. (Helen's sister.)	
Sept. 7 (Mon.)	W. came. (Willans Asquith.)	
Sept. 11 (Fr.)	—	
Sept. 14 (Mon.)	Funeral.	
Sept. 16 (Wed.)	Home.	

A letter which he wrote to Mrs. Horner a year later amplifies this bald record, and throws some light on a period otherwise obscure :

27 MARESFIELD GARDENS,  
FITZJOHNS AVENUE, N.W.

*Sund. 11th Sept. '92.*

It is a year to-day since my wife died, and I am going to talk to you about her and myself. You never knew or saw her. She was an angel from Heaven, and God took her back from this noisy world with unstained feet and an unspotted heart. Her garments did not need to be washed before she took her place in the "solemn troops and sweet Societies" of the Saints. Hers was one of those personalities which it is almost impossible to depict. The strong colours of the palette seem to be too heavy and garish ; it is difficult to paint a figure in the soft grey tints which would best fit her, and yet she was not neutral or negative. Her mind was clear and strong, but it was not cut in facets and did not flash lights, and no one would have called her clever or "intellectual." What gave her her rare quality was her character, which everyone who knew her intimately (Haldane for instance) agrees was the most selfless and unworldly that they have ever encountered. She was warm, impulsive, naturally quick-tempered, and generous almost to a fault, but in all the years of our married life I never knew an occasion when to do the right thing seemed to cost her an effort. She cared little for society, shrank from every kind of publicity and self-advertisement, hardly knew what ambition meant. She was more wrapped up in her children than any woman I have ever known. To me she was always loyal, sympathetic, devoted ; not without pride in such successes as I had ; but not the least anxious for me to "get on," never sanguine or confident, and as a rule inclined to the darker, and less hopeful view of things. I used sometimes to reproach her with her "pessimism." What has happened to me lately would have given her little real pleasure ; indeed, I doubt whether, if she had been here, I should have taken such a step. She was the gentlest and best of companions, a restricting rather than a stimulating influence, and knowing myself as I do I have often wondered that we walked so evenly together. I was only eighteen when I fell in love with her, and we married when we were little more than boy and girl. In the cant phrase, our marriage was a "great success" ; from first to last it was never troubled by any kind of sorrow or dissension ; and when the sun went down it was in an unclouded sky.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE HOME OFFICE

The General Election of 1892—A disappointing majority—The Unionist Ministers meet the new Parliament—Asquith selected to move vote of no confidence—Appointed Home Secretary—Three testing episodes—Reforms and Home Office Administration. C. A.

1892-1895 NOTWITHSTANDING the Parnell peripeteia, and the blight which it  
Age 39-42 imparted to by-elections, Mr. Gladstone, at eighty-three, toyed with the fancy of a three-figure majority as the result of the General Election of July 1892. His Chief Whip (Arnold Morley) had formed a soberer estimate, which the result confirmed almost exactly. The Liberals were returned with a majority (including the Irish) of only forty. In the view of Harcourt and many other Liberals this was as bad as a defeat. Lord Morley (*Recollections*, i, 374) says : " We " (Asquith and he), " agreed that a worse stroke of luck than such a majority has never befallen political leaders." Mr. Gladstone himself only retained Midlothian by a narrow margin : a majority of 4000 odd dwindled to one of 690. Asquith was returned by a slightly reduced majority (294 as against 376 in 1886). He writes to Mrs. Horner (12th July, 1892) after the result was known :

*Asquith to Mrs. Horner.*

1 PAPER BUILDINGS,  
TEMPLE, LONDON, E.C.  
12th July, 1892.

I had a hardish fight at the end, the Kirk, who is a vigorous old lady scratching and kicking at me like a muscular virago. I was more pleased with my boy's (Raymond's) election than my own : on the day that I was returned he got a scholarship at Winchester.

I went over on Friday afternoon to Glasgow and spent the night with our friends there. I hoped to have joined in celebrating Eddy's victory at Partick, but things went wrong and he was rather heavily beaten. Nevertheless we were drawn in triumph thro' streets by an enthusiastic mob, and we finished up the evening by visiting about midnight the *Mail* office, to see the crowd which nightly assembles there to wait

the "results." It was an extraordinary sight—20,000 people, the papers said—and when we were recognised at the windows there were loud demands for a speech. Ultimately to appease them we went down and from the steps I bellowed a paragraph of roaring platitudes about the flowing tide, etc. etc. Eddy Tennant followed, and then there were deafening cries for "Miss Tennant," who proceeded to deliver a highly successful maiden speech. It was an amusing experience.

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Saturday I spent in Arran, and was back home on Sunday morning. Yesterday I lunched with J. Morley, but our talk was of elections and majorities and savoured too much of the shop to be worth reporting.

There are certainly times in life—a general election being one—when your friend's theory that the judgment day is over and that this is hell seems plausible. Between you and me (tho' as a hardened optimist I scarcely admit it to myself) I am not in high spirits about the future—the country's, the party's, my own. To save others, even if one cannot save oneself, is something; but to fail in both would be a poor result.

Yours ever,

H. H. A.

Mr. Gladstone, from the moment of the "new departure," had counted it a prime desideratum, that any party or combination which propounded a solution of the Irish question should command a majority independent of the Irish in Parliament. Not only was this blessing to be a second time denied him, but the slenderness of his hybrid forces foredoomed any Irish Bill, in all human likelihood, to rejection by the House of Lords.<sup>1</sup> In the event not only did the Peers murder the Home Rule Bill at birth, but they proceeded to "maim, maul, mangle, and mutilate" in its cradle the rest of the Government's legislative progeny. Of its controversial measures the Death Duties Budget of 1894 almost alone survived the stiletto or the scalpel of a Chamber which at that time still accepted the House of Commons as its master in the sphere of finance.

Lord Salisbury decided against immediate resignation, and met Parliament in early August. Asquith, some months before, had had it conveyed to him pretty clearly that he and his principal companions in arms might expect office in the next Liberal Government.<sup>2</sup> Arthur Balfour, taking this consummation for granted, had strongly dissuaded him (though he needed no dissuading) from accepting legal office. The impression that he was destined for distinguished preferment was clinched when Mr. Gladstone selected him to move

<sup>1</sup> Gladstone after the election was for a while in favour of shelving Home Rule by a resolution, rather than taking it in hand at once by a Bill. (Asquith's diary—23rd July, 1892.)

<sup>2</sup> In a conversation with John Morley (recorded in his diary under 8th April, 1892) in which the composition of the next Government was discussed, Asquith seems to have expressed reluctance to take office at all. "Explained my reasons for not wanting legal office, or *any* under present circumstances political and personal. He strong the other way. . . . Vague talk as to whether I could be in Cabinet. . . ."

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an Amendment to the Address, to the effect that H.M.'s Government should, but did not, possess the confidence of the House. *The Times*, no friendly critic, conceded that the speech in which he did so was extremely adroit and ingenious.

He began by rallying the Government on the omission from the Queen's speech of any legislative programme. "On ordinary occasions," he said, "the speech from the Throne provides the mover and seconder with a variety of topics, and the Address itself is in the nature of a grace before meat, in which the House expresses in anticipation its gratitude for the legislative bounty of H.M.'s Government. On the present occasion the cupboard is bare, and to these Honourable Gentlemen has been entrusted the task of formulating the thanks of the House for a completely empty table." They were met together to take part in the obsequies of a dead majority. "Both the Honourable Gentlemen came to bury Cæsar, and we need not grudge them the licence of eulogy . . . which is always permitted in an epitaph." He went on to challenge the contention that the composite character of the Liberal majority robbed the Liberal Party of any moral title to govern. A majority is none the less a majority, because if you subtract one of its constituent elements it ceases to be a majority at all. "I protest, in the name of this still united Kingdom, against this fantastic development of an abstract separatist logic. If you subtract from the total majority the votes contributed by Scotland and Wales we are in a minority." Were the Tories going to apply their principle to that extent? And if not, why not? "If your doctrine is good, that the majority can be analysed into a majority contributed by Ireland, surely it must be equally good when it is analysed into a majority contributed by Scotland and Wales. I go further, and say it is equally good when it can be analysed into a majority contributed by England. . . . I venture then to assert these three propositions. I say, in the first place, that it is no more true to say of the present majority that it is contributed by Irish votes, than to say it is contributed by Scotch and Welsh votes; I say in the second place, that the dominating factor is the shifting of English and Scotch opinion; and I say, in the third place, upon the principle of true Unionism, which hon. members opposite profess, but which they seem very slow in crucial cases to put in practice . . . you are bound to look to the majority of the whole of the electorate and to nothing else."

The argument is worth noting in its application to the third Home Rule Bill. A genuine Unionist necessarily had some difficulty

in rejecting it, unless he regarded Irishmen as made of different clay from the other branches of the British race—as Lord Salisbury appeared to do when in 1886 he compared them to Hottentots. Asquith went on to deal faithfully with the Liberal Unionists in the following passage :

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“Sir, in 1886, ninety-four Dissident Liberals voted against the Second Reading of the Home Rule Bill. The same party has come back from the polls to-day with a total numerical strength of forty-seven. If six years have sufficed to reduce a body of ninety-four to a body of forty-seven, it is not a very difficult sum in political arithmetic to calculate with some degree of accuracy the date of the ultimate extinction of the species. In deference to this transient and precarious alliance, the Tory Party have gone in for a course of legislative experiments which were too liberal for their own consciences, but not liberal enough for the people of Great Britain. The result is to be seen in the General Election. Surely it ought to open their eyes. To angle in other people’s waters for votes and yet not to catch them, to poach through the whole of Parliament and in the end to take nothing, but to be taken yourselves, to palter with principle, to betray your pledges, to be false to your past, and then to find that the wages of ignominy is a minority, that is to be guilty of one of those blunders which in politics are worse than a crime. Depend upon it, the people of this country, if they want Liberal legislation, will go to the Party which believes in it, which is not afraid of it, which will give it in a complete and effective form. It now rests,” he concluded, “with the House to execute the judgment which the nation has pronounced.”

(House of Commons, 8th Aug., 1892.)

The House did so, and the Government resigned. In the Cabinet which Mr. Gladstone (exclaiming against the “butchery” involved in the process) proceeded to form, Harcourt’s return to the Exchequer and that of John Morley to the Chief Secretaryship for Ireland had been foreseen. Campbell-Bannerman again became Secretary of State for War. Rosebery, after a spell of Delphic inaccessibility and spectacular vacillation, was in the nick of time talked into accepting the Foreign Office. The telegram “So be it—R.” was received with a sigh of relief by the Cabinet makers : though with one of them relief found only qualified expression. “Without you,” said Harcourt to Rosebery, “the new Government would be ridiculous : with you it is only impossible.” As regards the other offices, the claims of Asquith and his confrères were generously recognised. He himself became Home Secretary, Acland, President of the Board of Education, Sir E. Grey, Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and “Tom” Ellis a Whip. No placé, greatly to the sorrow of his allies, was found for Haldane, and the claims advanced for him a year or two later to a vacant Law Officership were abortive.

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When Queen Victoria at Osborne handed the seals of office to her new Ministers, Sir W. Harcourt records that she was very gracious to him (telling him he had grown very like the Archbishop), and seemed "pleased with the young Home Secretary." (Gardiner, ii, 185.) "An intelligent, rather good-looking man," is the impression of him recorded by the Queen in a memorandum written immediately after this first meeting. (*Queen Victoria's Letters*, II, 1895-1900, p. 149.) He appears, from his diary, to have had a talk with the Queen after dinner "about sentences, prisoners, Mrs. Maybrick, Mrs. Montagu, Sir E. Grey." (26 Aug., 1892.) It is probably this talk to which the Queen alludes in the following passage of a letter of the same date: "Had a conversation with Mr. Asquith whom I thought pleasant, straightforward, and sensible: He is a very clever lawyer, who was with Sir H. James." Later in this Parliament he was to be entrusted with a delicate task, which the favourable impression he had made on his Sovereign no doubt facilitated: that of convincing her that the proposed disestablishment of the Church of Wales was not, as she supposed, the first step in the process of disestablishing that of England.

The next three precarious, uneasy, exacting years were spent in "ploughing the sands"<sup>1</sup> and "filling up the cup,"<sup>2</sup> as the process of passing bills for rejection by the Upper House was described in the current cant of the day.

Until Mr. Gladstone's retirement in March 1894 the Second Home Rule Bill filled the stage. Its main conduct was assumed by the Prime Minister. In his eighty-fourth year, half-deaf, and more than half-blind, the veteran was daunted neither by the tenuity of his parliamentary forces, nor by the moral certainty that his colossal labours would be nullified by the Peers. Untiringly he toiled through quite the longest and one of the hottest Parliamentary Sessions on record, and duly deposited the fruit of his labours in the dragon's mouth.<sup>3</sup> In some respects, he put difficulties in his own way. His knowledge of the subject, in all its anfractuosities, was inconveniently profound; and the copiousness of his exposition was at times not only exploited by the opposition but deplored by his colleagues. "It must be rather heart-breaking for you," said Asquith to the

<sup>1</sup> Asquith's metaphor, 2nd November, '94, of which he is careful, in *Fifty Years of Parliament*, to explain the unoriginality. Ovid and Juvenal have it, to go no further back.

<sup>2</sup> Chamberlain's famous boomerang phrase—"I resent the insults, the injuries, and the injustice from which you have suffered so long at the hands of a privileged assembly. But the cup is nearly full. The career of high-handed wrong is coming to an end." (20th October, 1884.)

<sup>3</sup> The House of Lords rejected the Bill by 419 to 41.

Chief Secretary on the bench. "It's brutal to put into words, but really, if Mr. G. stood aside more, we might get on better." Morley "put aside the impious thought," but agreed that this consummation might save parliamentary time. (Morley, *Recollections*, i, pp. 359-360.) For all this, Mr. Gladstone's last fight was a miracle of moral and intellectual vigour, breasting and breaking every sort of obstacle.

Asquith, whose name was on the back of the Bill, contributed a speech on its second reading (14th April, 1893) which *The Times* conceded to make "perhaps as good a case for his clients as anyone who had yet spoken on the same side." A good speech, but a typical lawyer's! Yet Asquith's method in debate, whether on this or other occasions, was lawyer-like only in its verbal idiom. His speeches, or some of them, are fairly thickly studded with "if and when," and "unless and until," "material and relevant," "by reason only that," and "provided always"—the convenient but unlovely patois of our Statute Law. But they are oddly free from many of the shortcomings commonly and with some justice imputed to forensic eloquence. So far from contesting small points he had a habit, most galling to an opponent, of making him a "present" of them. Barristers tend to concentrate on the weakness of the enemy's position, and to evade or ignore its strength; Asquith was disposed both by temperament and habit to attack its centre. Nor did many speakers eschew so rigidly the cheap, the specious, or the sentimental. His terseness again contrasted favourably with the prolixity and self-repetition which is the besetting sin of some popular advocates. The present speech was a closely reasoned defence of three propositions: First, that the Bill preserved Imperial supremacy: secondly that it conferred on Ireland a real and not an illusory autonomy: and thirdly that it afforded adequate safeguards for the Irish minority. He found occasion, in the course of it, to fire a "whiff of grape-shot" at Mr. Chamberlain, who had alleged that the Bill handed over Ireland to the unscrupulous and discredited leaders of the Nationalist party. "Does he need to be reminded," asked the Home Secretary, "that in 1885 and as late as the beginning of 1886, he was the author of proposals to entrust to these very men and to their leader Mr. Parnell the position of Chief Secretary for Ireland?" He went on to dwell caustically on the "preposterous" claim of Ulster that because she disliked Home Rule the rest of Ireland must go without it; and ended with a finely phrased encomium on the Prime Minister.

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## II

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During the Session of 1893 Asquith introduced and piloted through the House an Employers' Liability Bill. It was intended to sweep away the last remnants of one of the silliest doctrines of our Common Law—that of "Common Employment." The general rule is that A. can maintain an action against B. for damage inflicted on him by the negligence (within the course of his employment) of B.'s servant. The doctrine in question engrafted an exception on that rule whereby A. was deprived of any such remedy if A. is also a servant of B. An Act of 1880 had scotched the doctrine: Asquith's Bill aimed at killing it. The House of Lords, however, mangled the measure so seriously (especially by permitting contracting out of its benefits) that it was dropped.

But during the greater part of his first year of office Asquith's time was heavily mortgaged to extra-Parliamentary matters. He was, *qua* Home Secretary, engaged in grappling with a succession of administrative dilemmas. While he had established his name as one of the first debaters in the House, his quality as a departmental chief was as yet untested. It was to be tried in the fires of three exacting ordeals, each of them involving a potential clash between the Government and one section or another of its by no means too ample political following. Of this *τρικυμία*, from which he emerged with a new and enhanced prestige, some account must here be given.

Immediately after his accession to office he was confronted with a delicate and difficult decision regarding the use, for public meetings, of Trafalgar Square. There had prevailed for decades past a notion—quite unfounded in law, but firmly entrenched in sentiment—that the public had a legal right to hold meetings in this area.<sup>1</sup> This supposed right had in 1887 and 1888 been grossly abused by gatherings, mainly of the unemployed, which had brought with them dislocation of traffic, interruption of business and loss to shopkeepers in the neighbourhood, disorder, and crime. It was in connection with one such meeting that Asquith had unsuccessfully defended Cunninghame Graham and John Burns from charges of "unlawful assembly." There had followed on these disturbances a summary prohibition, by Asquith's predecessor at the Home Office (Henry Matthews), of all meetings whatever in the affected area. This created great soreness among the advocates of free speech and

<sup>1</sup> Actually the public had a right, founded on long user, to employ the Square (which was Crown property) as a thoroughfare. They could pass over it, but had no right to use it as a rostrum.

supposed prescriptive right, who included powerful allies of the Liberal Government. Tories were inclined to rub their hands over the troubles which in this quarter awaited the new Government and, in particular, the new Home Secretary. The aggrieved bodies, they argued, would be deeply wounded if the existing prohibition were maintained : to some extent, Liberals in Parliament had committed themselves against its maintenance ; law and order, on the other hand, which a Home Secretary was bound to protect, would be imperilled if it were revoked. Nor was the situation simplified by the fact that the prohibition in force was thought in high legal quarters to be of doubtful validity, and such as might provoke an embarrassing attempt to test it on the part of the champions of Liberty.

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The Metropolitan Radical Federation, in fact, intended to test it in November 1892 : and on 19th October a deputation from this formidable body waited on the Home Secretary to know if he would permit their meeting or not. He had made up his mind : and the decision which he announced to the deputies actually satisfied every interest involved. He appeased the local shopkeepers and busmen by the admission that under the old conditions meetings had degenerated into an intolerable public nuisance ; he refreshed the deputies by the declaration that this fact furnished no good reason why the public should be permanently excluded, "at all times, however convenient, under any conditions, however reasonable, and for any purpose, however legitimate, from their accustomed place of meeting." For the future meetings would be permitted subject to four conditions. They were to be held (1) by daylight ; (2) only on Saturday afternoons, Sundays, and Bank Holidays (when the shops are shut and the traffic comparatively small) ; (3) only after reasonable previous notice to the police (who can thus make the necessary arrangements for route of processions and control of traffic) ; (4) subject to such regulations as to route, etc., as the police might in each case make. This solution satisfied everyone, antagonised nobody, and has worked without a hitch for forty years. It evoked a characteristically phrased tribute from Lord Rosebery :

*Lord Rosebery to Asquith.*

21.10.'92.

MY DEAR ASQUITH,

In reply to your kind note let me send you the expression of my hearty delight on what is a real subject of congratulation. I mean your treatment of the Trafalgar Square contention and deputation. To have

1892-1895 pleased *The Times* and the *Star* and indeed everybody, may rank with  
 Age 39-42 the achievements of Hannibal in crossing the Alps or of Orpheus charming  
 his miscellaneous congregation. No one rejoices more sincerely than  
 Yours,  
 R.<sup>1</sup>

This wave hardly surmounted, another loomed ahead, of aspect more menacing. Were fourteen Irish dynamiters, imprisoned since the early 'eighties, to be released or at least to have their sentences commuted? The Parnellite rump of the Irish party—a small body, but one which the present Government could not estrange without some risk to its political existence—said “Yes”; and in January 1893, Mr. J. Redmond, their leader, moved an Amendment to the Address in this sense. A weak Minister might well have snatched at this occasion for the exercise of a facile politic leniency, and shrunk from the immediate penalties of a long-sighted firmness. But there was a vein of iron in the Home Secretary's composition: convinced of the rightness and even the inevitability of his decision, he refused to make the smallest concession to the Irish demand. The speech (his first as a Minister) in which he vindicated this uncompromising decision was one of pulverising force. He dealt with each of the fourteen cases in a way which left the Redmondites, in the sphere of fact, hopelessly gravelled, while in the sphere of general principle he surprised them by a direct assault on the mainstay of their plea—the contention, namely, that the State should be more lenient to “political” than to “non-political” offenders. On this point Asquith proposed an “acid” test. The Phoenix Park murderers were “political” offenders. Ought they on this account to have been spared the death penalty? Asquith himself, who in all his life never said a good word for his speeches (in his diary, while he kept one, their occurrence is marked by the monosyllable “spoke”), was disarmed by his own persuasiveness on this occasion to the point of tolerance, and described his speech in a letter as one “to which I can fairly say no answer was possible.”

The first of these administrative tangles had threatened to embroil Asquith and the Government with the London Radicals, the second with the Parnellites. The third was to embroil him in good earnest with “Labour,” and to call down on his head for years after unmerited obloquy from that quarter. The event which produced this untoward result is perhaps now remembered mainly for a classic formulation (by the Bowen Commission) of the legal

<sup>1</sup> Lord Rosebery himself was to charm an equally “miscellaneous congregation” by his Chesterfield speech in 1901. But the charm only operated for a matter of days.

position of soldiers and civilians in times of public disorder. Yet inasmuch as it fixed on Asquith, for at least a quarter of a century, the stigma of "shooting down workmen to please employers," some brief notice of it is here required. 1892-1895  
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In the autumn of 1893, a strike of 250,000 coal miners—a most prolonged and bitter dispute—began in the North of England. In the West Riding of Yorkshire, this contest was marked by scenes of great turbulence to which the great majority of the strikers themselves were by no means enthusiastic parties: collieries were wrecked, buildings burnt, and neutral onlookers held to ransom. The local police force was quite unequal to the demands of this emergency. The local authorities commandeered reinforcements from counties as remote as Wiltshire. The Home Secretary, at their instance, despatched four hundred members of the Metropolitan Police Force to the area of disorder. And still the trouble grew. At last the local authority demanded, on their own responsibility, the intervention of troops, which the military authorities, in the pursuance of the duty laid upon them by the law, duly furnished. At Featherstone, a vast crowd armed with bludgeons, set buildings on fire, did their utmost to extend the conflagration, and concentrated their efforts on the destruction of a particular colliery. This attack a small body of soldiers (not more than thirty strong) sought, amid volleys of stones and iron bolts, to stem. So long as they remained passive, the task was impossible: they must inevitably have been surrounded and overcome. The Riot Act had been read by the local magistrates, who had made seven appeals to the crowd to disperse, without result. The civil authority had no choice but to direct the troops to fire. They did so, and two men, on the fringe of the menacing crowd, were unfortunately killed. Within forty-eight hours of this tragedy, peace was completely and permanently re-established.

Loud and long were the anathemas heaped by "Labour" on the Home Secretary for his supposed complicity in this result. Their reverberations echoed for twenty or thirty years. On platform after platform he was greeted by the working men among his audience with snarls of "Featherstone," and "murderer."<sup>1</sup> The matter was raised on 20th September, 1893, in the House of Commons, and Asquith replied to his critics. He complained that most of those who had been vilifying him in the country were not to be seen in their places: and proceeded to explain and vigorously to defend, the very limited and almost mechanical part he had played in the

<sup>1</sup> As to Asquith's treatment of these demonstrations, see page 210.

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affair. "It cannot," he said, "be too clearly laid down, that the responsibility for the prevention and suppression of local disorder lies, where it has always lain, since the earliest period of our history, with the local authorities." That was why, if rioters damage a house, the local authority, and not the Central Executive, must answer for the damage. That is why, for sixty years past, the county and borough police had been under local control. The local authorities alone could form a judgment worth having, of the dimensions of a local riot, of the forces required to keep it under control, and of the proper handling of those forces. The Home Secretary could indeed offer advice: they were free to accept or reject it. He was, it was true, as a matter of mechanics, the administrative channel through which they could indent for such further protective forces as they deemed necessary. But it would ill become him, necessarily less well informed, to deny any such demand put forward by them and backed by the weight of their local knowledge. The appeal for troops was made by the local authority, on their own responsibility, and complied with by the military authority (the Home Office acting as a mere ministerial conduit pipe) in pursuance of the duty which the law laid upon them.

He added that the question whether the military had fired with or without sufficient justification, was still an open one. Two Coroner's juries holding inquests on the two victims had pronounced on the issue, in different senses. Having regard to their decisions, and to the obscurity in which many material facts were involved, he proposed to constitute a tribunal of inquiry. But so far as his own action was concerned he challenged his critics to say whether any of them, with his knowledge, and exercising his functions, would have done otherwise than he had.

The promised Commission of inquiry was presided over by Lord Bowen, Mr. Haldane and Sir Albert Rollitt acting as assessors. After an exhaustive investigation it vindicated unreservedly the action of the troops. Placed as they were, they had no alternative but to fire, and the magistrate would have failed in his legal duty if he had not called on them to do so. The Commission further performed a public service by removing certain obstinate popular misconceptions. For instance, it exploded the notion that force may not be used against rioters until the "Riot Act has been read": and laid down in plain terms the principle—not perhaps even yet sufficiently recognised—that according to the Common Law of England, every citizen (whether soldier or civilian) is not only entitled but bound, in times of public disorder, to help to maintain

the peace by any necessary degree of force—killing not excluded—if no other expedient will serve this supreme purpose.

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### III

#### INDUSTRIAL AND DEPARTMENTAL REFORMS

The following memorandum, kindly prepared by the Home Office, gives a summary of Asquith's activities as head of that Department in connection with industrial and administrative reforms :

"Mr. Asquith's main contributions to improvements in matters connected with Factories and Workshops were the strengthening and reorganisation of the Inspectorate and the successful passing of the Factory Act of 1895. He also appointed several Committees to inquire into the conditions in various Dangerous Trades whose reports led later to the making of special rules or regulations for the control of the dangerous processes. His interest in industrial matters gave a great and lasting impetus to the whole conduct of industrial work in the Home Office and by the Inspectorates.

He was appointed Home Secretary on 18th August, 1892, and by December 1892, he had prepared and submitted to the Treasury proposals for strengthening the staff of Factory Inspectors by the addition of fifteen Inspectors' Assistants (to inspect workshops, thus freeing Inspectors for Factory Inspection) and by the appointment of two women Inspectors. The ladies appointed in May 1893 were Miss May Abraham (now Mrs. H. J. Tennant, C.H.) and Miss Mary Paterson. This was the first appointment of women to the Inspectorate or indeed to any branch of the Home Office and in Miss Anderson's words 'gave them their liberal starting point and wide field of activity.'<sup>1</sup> At the end of 1893 he made arrangements for the further addition of one Superintending Inspector, ten Inspectors' Assistants, and two more women Inspectors. The ladies appointed in June 1894 were Miss Lucy Deane and Miss (now Dame) Adelaide Anderson, who was afterwards Principal Lady Inspector when the staff of women inspectors had increased to more than thirty.

At the same time he strengthened the Division of the Home Office which dealt with factories and all other industrial matters by transferring to it Mr. (now Sir Edward) Troup, and a little later Mr. (now Sir Malcolm) Delevingne.

In 1894 and 1895 he devoted much time and energy to the preparation of a new Factory Bill. This Bill, as introduced in March 1895 and as finally passed, marked an important advance in the protection of workers in factories and workshops. It contained numerous provisions for the protection of the health of workpeople, and *inter alia* aimed at preventing unhealthy overcrowding by fixing a standard of room-space for each person employed. It contained also new provisions to guard against accidents from moving machinery and new requirements as to the reporting and registering of accidents. It gave the Home Secretary

<sup>1</sup> *Women in the Factory*, Adelaide Anderson, D.B.E., Murray, 1922, p. 10.

1892-1895 power to order formal investigations of accidents. For the first time it  
Age 39-42 required factories to be so constructed as to give the person employed means of escape in case of fire. It restricted overtime. It brought laundries and docks for the first time within the scope of the Factory Acts—and it adapted the provisions of these Acts to the complicated conditions of Tenement Factories. It required returns to be made of outworkers, introduced for the first time the regulations which require piece workers in the textile trades to be supplied with information as to the particulars on which their wages are calculated and added to the Factory Code a number of special provisions affecting particular industries.

The Bill was still being discussed by the Grand Committee on Trade when on 21st June the vote on the alleged shortage of cordite led to the fall of the Government and it was only by most skilful handling that Mr. Asquith, now no longer Home Secretary, secured the passing of his Bill through its remaining stages in the Commons. On 6th July, the last day before the dissolution, it passed all stages in the House of Lords and received the Royal Assent.

In all the work relating to Factories, Mr. Asquith received much help from Mr. Herbert (afterwards Lord) Gladstone until he left the Home Office in March 1895 to become First Commissioner of Works.

‘Dangerous Trades Committees’ were appointed by Mr. Asquith to inquire into the conditions in (1) Chemical Works; (2) the industries of the Potteries—China and Earthenware; (3) Quarries; (4) the use of White Lead; (5) the Brass Trades and (6) the manufacture, filling and use of Gas Cylinders. On the very eve of his leaving the Home Office, he took steps with a view to the appointment of two further Committees, one to inquire into the conditions in wool-sorting and the other to investigate a large number of other dangerous trades.”

## CHAPTER VIII

### MR. GLADSTONE'S RETIREMENT AND AFTER

The Naval Estimates—Mr. Gladstone almost alone in his opposition—Resignation—Rosebery and Harcourt—Rosebery succeeds—Inauspicious beginnings and troubled course of the new Government—Its fall. C. A.

WHEN Mr. Gladstone resigned on 3rd March, 1894, a number of 1894-1895  
Age 41-42 factors contributed, in unequal degrees, to this event. First, the gradual "closing of the doors of the senses," of which he had complained since 1892, had latterly proceeded apace. This tragic development counselled, and must in all probability soon compel, retirement. Secondly, with the rejection by 419 against 41 Peers of the second Home Rule Bill, his main ostensible reason for remaining in public life had vanished. Thirdly, and most important of all, he was hopelessly at issue with his Cabinet over Lord Spencer's naval estimates. Finally, the step which he had proposed as affording the sole exit from this impasse—an immediate dissolution and campaign against the House of Lords—found little or no favour with the mass of his colleagues. He hoisted the signal. They put the telescope to the blind eye.

The naval crisis came to a sort of head on 9th January, 1894. The estimate had by then been so far pared down as to wring a reluctant assent from the exacting pacifism of Sir W. Harcourt. The Prime Minister was unappeased, and seemingly implacable in his opposition. He was agitated and resentful. "These periods of excitement," he wrote to Sir A. West, "are very distressing, for in my interview with Harcourt I broke one pair of glasses, in my interview with Spencer another, and then lost a third."<sup>1</sup> At the Cabinet of 9th January he gave his colleagues clearly to understand that they must choose between a further substantial cut and his own resignation. Of Cabinet Ministers Shaw-Lefevre alone claimed to share the unbending views of his leader. Morley, Asquith, and Rosebery conferred together after the Cabinet. Morley (*Recollections*, Vol. ii, p. 2) says that the view not only of these but of the

<sup>1</sup> Sir A. West, *Diaries*, 1860-1898, p. 233.



1894-1895  
Age 41-42

majority of the Commoners in the Cabinet was that now was the "appointed hour for our Chief's resignation." The only difference between Ministers was that which divided the "this weekers" from the "next monthers," and the "this weekers" at the moment predominated. They were convinced, rightly or wrongly, that no concession could be made to his views without grave danger to national security, and that they could not honourably give way. Nevertheless the most strenuous efforts were made by many of his colleagues to induce him to compromise and stay. On the 10th—the day after his ultimatum to the Cabinet—Lord Rosebery told Sir A. West that he had spent an hour with Mr. G. and used all the weapons in his armoury. "I might as well," said Rosebery, "have addressed my arguments to your hat." (Sir A. West, *Diaries*, 10 Jan., 1894.)

A few entries from Asquith's diary mark the stages of the crisis from this point on :

13 Jan. 1894.

Conversation with H.G. (Herbert Gladstone).

Mr. G. is open to receive overtures in the direction of a substantial reduction in this year's estimate. Lunch with Harcourt. Talk with H. and Loulou. We agreed that we could make no proposals. Best chance to trust to time and Atlantic breezes.

23 Jan.

Lunch at Rosebery's—where A. West, who came on a flying visit from Biarritz, to report bad news. Mr. G. "immovable as Gibraltar" : the rest of us except G. S. L. (Shaw Lefevre) "mad and drunk." Now talks of remaining in the H. of C. and attacking us on the flank.

This language is typical of the "great excitability" and "fierceness of mood" which Gladstone's old friend, Lord Acton, observed in him at this time. Oddly enough John Morley, of all people, seems to have thought Mr. G.'s attitude was merely histrionic and assumed for tactical ends.<sup>1</sup>

2 Feb.

Walk with Rosebery. Mr. G. bridge-building : affects now to think that J. M. agreed that he ought to go ; also much impressed by "recent action of the House of Lords."<sup>2</sup> R. tells me that he knows privately that Mr. G. is trying to find out what impression A. West's *démenti*<sup>3</sup> has had on his colleagues. Offers a Cabinet. "Freezing reserve."

<sup>1</sup> "J. M. miserable at the shattering of his idol, being convinced (wrongly) that Mr. G.'s attitude was all acting and that his anguish was for nothing." (Sir A. West, *Diaries*, 1860-1898, p. 242.)

<sup>2</sup> Not only in rejecting the Home Rule Bill, but in emasculating the Employers' Liability and Parish Councils Bills.

<sup>3</sup> A rumour of the Prime Minister's impending resignation had been contradicted on his behalf.

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7 Feb.

After breakfast to A. Morley's, where was A. West just back from Biarritz with Mr. G.'s latest. He proposes an immediate dissolution—pretext being action of H. of Lords on our Bills: we all agree that this is madness.

12 Feb.

Cabinet. Nil.

17 Feb.

Cabinet dinner. *Rien!*

This dinner is amusingly described in the late Viscount Harcourt's journal: the strained expectancy of the guests: the diplomatic pauses in general conversation, to enable Mr. G. to announce his intentions: the Prime Minister's resolute and embarrassing trap-pism: and the dispersal of the company *re infecta*. Sir W. Harcourt's comment, when asked what he thought of the proceedings, was typical: "I feel as I did at the Home Office, when a high sheriff told me he had three times tried to hang a man and failed, and I had to go down to the H. of C. and say that the man deserved to be hanged but that I had reprieved him."

21 Feb.

Lunch with Rosebery: J. M.: Harcourt will take 2nd place—leader of the H. of C. with condition as to seeing F.O. papers and being free to act on occasion without consulting P.M. Rosebery strongly averse to serving "over" him.

1 March.

Mr. G.'s last Cabinet. Farewell, Kimberley and Harcourt. Lunch at Rosebery's: Spencer, J. M., and Acland. Mr. G. on the H. of Lords. J. M. and Irish office: "bomb."

Several vivid accounts have been given of this Cabinet. Its members were deeply and naturally moved by the passing of the veteran from among them. Mr. Gladstone, beneath a composed deportment and a mask of alabaster, was moved also—but less with sorrow than a contained anger. "Resigned! I did not resign—I was put out," he exclaimed in later years. Nor was his resentment disarmed by the valedictory words of two of his colleagues. Asquith has told elsewhere how after a short allocution from Lord Kimberley, Harcourt "produced from his box and proceeded to read a well-thumbed MS. of highly elaborated eulogy. Of those who were present there are now few survivors: but which of them can forget the expression of Mr. Gladstone's face, as he looked on with hooded eyes and tightened lips at this maladroit performance?" So little

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was the old lion mollified by the perfectly genuine emotion of his colleagues, that he often thereafter referred to this their last meeting as the "blubbing Cabinet."

3 March.

Spencer, Rosebery and I went to see J. M. Mr. G. resigned and R. agreed to form a Government.

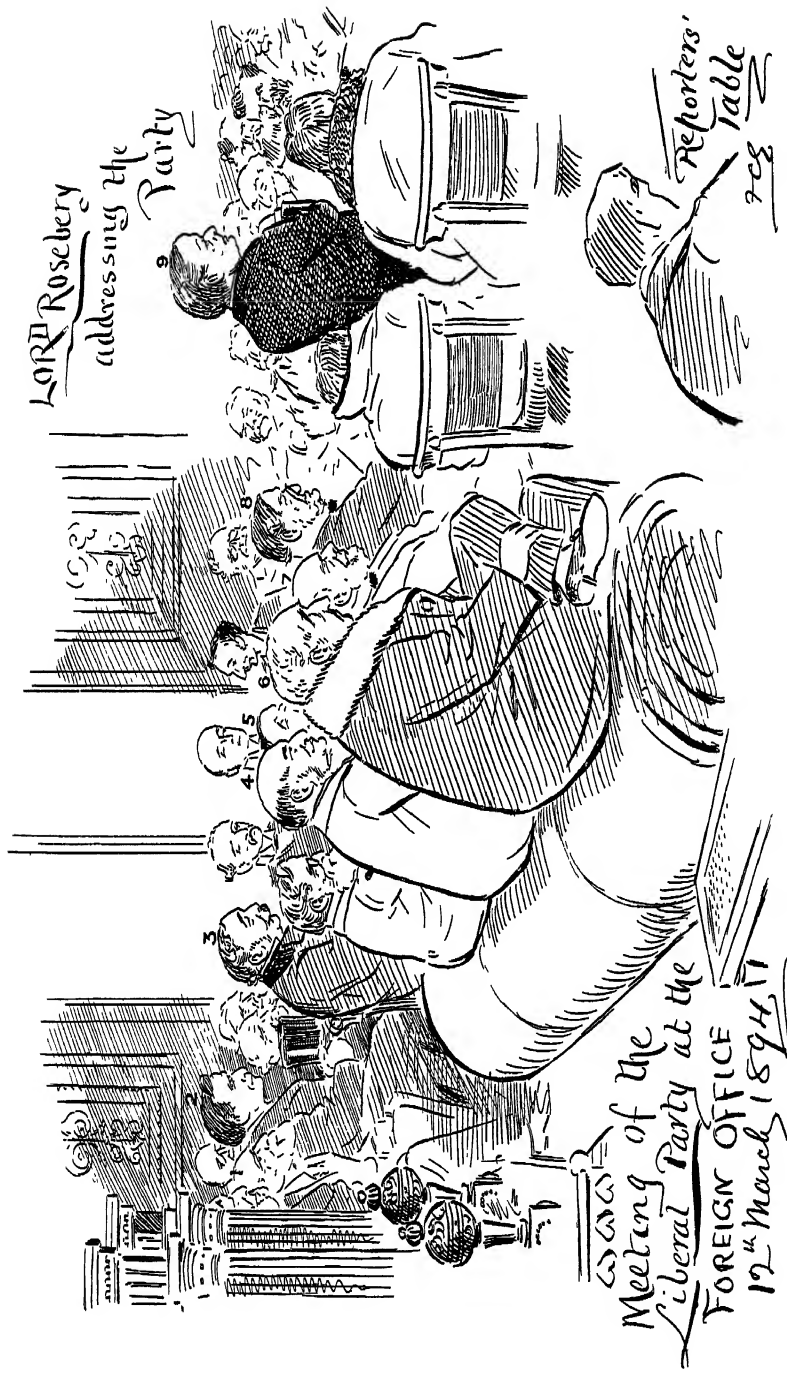
## II

We know that if the Queen had asked Mr. Gladstone's advice as to his successor, he would have submitted the name of Lord Spencer, or possibly Lord Kimberley. Instead of consulting him, she sent of her own initiative for Lord Rosebery. Rosebery, indeed, and Harcourt were the only eligible candidates for the succession. Harcourt's intellectual power, long parliamentary experience, unwearied assiduity,<sup>1</sup> and redoubtable bruising quality in debate constituted a strong *prima facie* claim for him. To these qualities he added a fundamentally affectionate nature and an excellent sense of humour. Yet his disqualifications were felt by the great majority of his colleagues to be crippling. They arose mainly from temper, in the comprehensive as well as the narrow sense of that term. It was impossible to foresee from hour to hour what would and what would not unseal the inexhaustible vials of his wrath and discharge their blistering contents on the heads of foes, friends, and colleagues. Anger reduces some men to an opportune speechlessness; it made Sir William fatally articulate. While his choler endured, he assailed its object with a vehemence and variety of invective which declined no medium,<sup>2</sup> rejected no weapon, spared no sensitive spot. As soon as it subsided he was prepared to laugh hugely, to shake hands, and forget. Not so, always, his victims. They, in the words of Mr. Gardiner, "winc'd and remembered." Someone has remarked that you cannot "unpull a man's nose," and Sir William's disregard of this maxim may well have cost him the first place in the State. At the present crisis the Cabinet were almost unanimously opposed to his succession. The statement attributed to Morley by Viscount Harcourt in his *Journal*<sup>3</sup>—that of the Commoners in the Cabinet Asquith and Acland alone resisted his claim—is, according to

<sup>1</sup> "When I am ill," he said, "I am in bed. When I am not, I am in the House of Commons."

<sup>2</sup> Except the telephone, which he hated: he would not speak through this instrument, but, according to his son, was known to pour ink into the mouthpiece in the hopes that it would flow into his interlocutor's ear—or mouth—as the case might be.

<sup>3</sup> Or by Mr. Gardiner, it is not clear which. *Life of Harcourt*, Vol. II, p. 269.



KEY TO NUMBERS —

2. H. H. A.
  5. John Morley.
  8. Sir Wm Haecourt.
- (From a drawing by F. Carruthers Gould)

1. James Bryce
4. Lord Hirschell.
7. Lord Kimberley.

3. Campbell-Bannerman.
6. Sir Charles Russell.
9. Lord Rosebery.



Asquith, moonshine.<sup>1</sup> Morley himself, who two years earlier had promised to support that claim, was probably more directly instrumental than anyone else in defeating it. Not only was his old backer determined not to serve *under* Harcourt, he was doubtful whether he could serve *with* him. The whole Liberal Press endorsed this estimate of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's disabilities, and rallied to Rosebery, not as an ideal, but as the only possible alternative choice.

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Lord Rosebery accordingly took his seat on what he was to describe later as "the most uneasy throne in Europe since that of Poland." The only material change he made in the personnel of the Ministry was to appoint Lord Kimberley his successor at the Foreign Office; an appointment which incensed Morley and helped with other factors gradually to urge him back into the arms of Harcourt. He seems to have thought that Rosebery had undertaken that the Foreign Minister should be in the Commons, and professed to have been "tricked." It was rumoured that he had coveted this portfolio for himself. However this may be, seeds were then sown of distrust and dislike between leading members of the Government which were to bear a pestilent harvest in the next few years.

Asquith's remark that no one could call this Cabinet a pleasant one in which to sit was well within the truth. To begin with, the Government majority, precarious and meagre from the start, was steadily disintegrating. Its members were like Polar explorers marooned on a melting ice-floe. Such a situation can be rendered endurable by a spirit of sweet reasonableness and loyal comradeship among its victims. So far, however, was this condition lacking, that within a few months the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House of Commons were literally not on speaking terms, communicating with one another, when they did so at all, through a distracted intermediary. Moreover, the Parliamentary début of the new Ministry was inauspicious in the extreme. It was marked by two fiascos, recorded in Asquith's diary with his usual economy of words :

12 March. House met. Heard Rosebery in H. of L. His *faux pas*.

13 March. Labby's amendment carried by 147 to 145.

14 March. Cabinet. Labby rescinded.

Lord Rosebery's *faux pas* was of course his pronouncement that "before Irish Home Rule is conceded by the Imperial Parliament, England, as the predominant member of the partnership of the

<sup>1</sup> *Fifty Years of Parliament*, Vol. I, p. 222.

1894-1895  
Age 41-42

three kingdoms, will have to be convinced of its justice." This might be read as pledging the party not to introduce another Home Rule Bill until they secured a majority of purely English members in its favour. So read, it was a revolutionary declaration, to which none of his colleagues would have subscribed. At Edinburgh a few days later the Prime Minister disclaimed this construction. All he had meant was that "if we wanted to carry Home Rule, we must carry conviction to the heart of England, and by those words I stand. They are a truism, they are a platitude in the sense in which I uttered them. . . ." But the original statement in its original interpretation had by then obtained such a start that no disclaimer could overtake it.

The second fiasco was the direct consequence of the first, and followed it within twenty-four hours. The Harcourtites availed themselves of the animus excited in the Irish and Welsh bosoms by the "predominant partner" speech, to strike a humiliating blow at its author. On the 13th March Labouchere moved in the House of Commons an amendment to the Address in favour of the abolition of the Peers' veto, and carried it by a majority of two (147 to 145). The Address as amended had to be negatived and a new Address introduced and agreed to. Speaking in Scotland a few days after this unedifying mutiny Asquith said: "We are not what our opponents seem to think an ideal political party ought to be—a set of disciplined, mechanical, and almost automatic figures, who raise their feet at one and the same moment at the word of command." Beyond question they were not!

Despite its unpromising début, and the personal jars and clashes which agitated its ranks, the Government during the session of 1894 achieved one clanging legislative triumph. Sir William Harcourt introduced and carried through all its stages by small but sufficient majorities the famous Death Duties Budget. The "Probate Duty" which had in the past fallen on unsettled personalty alone, was now extended under the name of Estate Duty to settled personalty and land: hardly less important, land was for the purposes of the duty to be assessed at its true capital value. The impost was estimated to yield £1,000,000 in the current and £4,000,000 in a full year. But Harcourt and Milner (who as Chairman of the Board of Inland Revenue was joint author with him of this reform) had builded better than they knew. Neither of them then dreamed that within a quarter of a century the duty would be yielding forty or fifty millions. Notwithstanding the increasingly shrill anathemas which it has wrung from a section of the rich, it is



*Thomson*

H. H. A.  
(1894)





still a firm favourite with Finance Ministers of every party, one of the richest and most enduring jewels in our fiscal crown. 1894-1895  
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Harcourt carried the Budget through the Commons almost single-handed, and plumed himself on never having resorted at any stage to the closure. Some of his colleagues who "also had claims to the time of the House of Commons" were a little galled by his forbearance. For Asquith's own parliamentary burdens were by no means light. In a single week towards the end of April he introduced a Welsh Disestablishment Bill and a Factories Bill, besides joining in debates on other matters. Want of time prevented either of these measures from being proceeded with in the current session. Outside Parliament he was strenuously engaged in administrative Home Office reforms. Yet he found time to speak in the country, and in June his intervention and arbitration settled a cab strike.

### III

Although the Government's majorities had been dwindling and its fall could not long be delayed, the legislative programme announced in the Queen's speech at the beginning of 1895 was a heavy one. Bills dealing with Welsh Disestablishment, Irish Land, Plural Voting, and Local Option were only a few of those foreshadowed in the Address. An effort must, it was thought, be made to liquidate the pledges of Newcastle. The House of Lords was certain to obstruct and might altogether frustrate this endeavour. It was none the less incumbent on the Government to invite the democratic Chamber to affirm the measures to which it was committed, leaving to the Peers the responsibility, and it was hoped the odium, of rejecting them.

The Government emerged with credit from the debate on the Address. It secured the rejection successively of three important amendments, and claimed to have received from the House three votes of confidence. On two of these amendments Asquith was the principal Government spokesman. One of these concerned the dynamiters. The other, which was moved by Chamberlain, was to the effect that the time of Parliament should not be occupied in the discussion of "measures which there was no prospect of passing into law, while proposals involving grave constitutional changes have been announced on which the judgment of Parliament should be taken without delay."

The speech in which Asquith, rising immediately after Chamberlain sat down, replied to him was among the best debating speeches

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he ever made. Chamberlain had drawn an historical parallel between the Melbourne Ministry which left office in 1841 and the present Government. Each, he said, resorted, when in desperate straits, to a new proposal—an attack on the Corn Laws in the first case, an attack on the House of Lords in the second. Asquith began by neatly turning the parallel against him. He pointed out that the Corn Laws survived Lord Melbourne's attack by exactly five years. "We now know the estimate which my right hon. friend is prepared to give of the probable duration of the present constitution of the House of Lords." Mr. Chamberlain was now asking the Government to shelve measures such as Welsh Disestablishment in order to debate a constitutional issue—that of the House of Lords. In 1887 he had been bitterly complaining that the Liberal Party would not shelve a constitutional issue (Home Rule) in order to deal with Welsh Disestablishment. As far back as 1885 he had pronounced it the most urgent of domestic reforms. What had happened in the interval to make it less pressing? Having regard to Mr. Chamberlain's past utterances about the House of Lords on the one hand, and the Government's measures on the other, it might have been hoped that instead of criticising the Government for introducing these measures, he would criticise the House of Lords for rejecting them, or better still, get his Liberal Unionist friends in the Upper Chamber to facilitate their passage. To Mr. Chamberlain's imprudent description of "filling up the cup" as "the latest electoral device," he answered as follows:

"I am not going to indulge in a wealth of quotation. I will content myself with citing a single passage from the speech delivered by him—and it is most pertinent to the question now before the House—in Denbighshire, before the General Election of 1885. These were the memorable words he used: 'I have no spite against the House of Lords, but as a Dissenter I have an account to settle with them, and I promise you I will not forget the reckoning. I share your hopes and aspirations, and I resent the insults, injuries, and the injustice from which you have suffered so long at the hands of a privileged Assembly!' I ask the particular attention of the House to the words which follow: 'But the cup is nearly full.' Yes, Sir, filling the cup, the right hon. gentleman told us to-night, was the latest electoral device. It is at least ten years old, and the credit for the introduction into our political vocabulary of this most useful and picturesque simile ought, I think, to be claimed by its true and original author. 'Yes,' he went on, 'the cup is nearly full. The career of high-handed wrong is coming to an end. We have been too long a peer-ridden nation.' Now, Sir, I should be glad to know, and the House would be glad to know—and if the discussion could be confined within reasonable limits I am not sure that we ought not to allow facilities

for the purpose—what my right hon. friend thinks has happened to the cup which was nearly full in 1885, and how he explains that in his view the House of Lords, which, as he told the electors then, had ‘sheltered every abuse and protected every privilege for nearly a century,’ has become, as he apparently thinks it has, the last refuge of popular liberty.”

1894-1895  
Age 41-42

(House of Commons, 15th Feb., 1895.)

Harcourt, whose appreciation could be as cordial and vehement as his dispraise, wrote to the Queen :

“Mr. Asquith greatly distinguished himself in his reply, and has established his position as one of the first debaters and speakers in the House of Commons. Sir W. Harcourt can hardly recall a more signal parliamentary success” : and to his son, more colloquially : “Asquith’s speech last night was a splendid success. He knocked Joe into a cocked hat. Even the Tories had to admit he was nowhere. . . . I found Margot in J. Morley’s room and told I had half a mind to kiss her, and A. offered to retire for the purpose. I don’t think I have ever heard a speech which created such an effect in the House. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Soon after this Asquith reintroduced the Welsh Disestablishment Bill and the Factory Bill. The second was passed, with some amendments, after the Government’s defeat and resignation, and on the last day before the dissolution. Asquith’s second-reading speech on the Welsh Bill can still be read with pleasure or with something as nearly approaching it as the technical and repellent nature of the subject admits. In conducting the measure through Committee he was exposed to a double fire. In front of him the defenders of the establishment thundered about sacrilege, while behind him a body of Welsh zealots clamoured for the provisions of the Bill to be stiffened. Prominent among these was Mr. David Lloyd George. On the 20th June the ministerial majority sank as low as seven. The next day lightning descended on the Government from a clear sky. Campbell-Bannerman, most popular of War Ministers, had just succeeded in persuading the Duke of Cambridge to resign the post of Commander-in-Chief, and had done so without hurting his feelings. He had earned golden opinions from all quarters—and not least from the Queen—for an exhibition of consummate diplomacy, whose outcome had been announced on the morning of the 21st. The same evening the Government were defeated in a snap division on a motion to reduce “C.B.’s” salary on the ground of an alleged deficiency in the supply of small arms ammunition and cordite. On the 27th June the Government resigned.

<sup>1</sup> Gardiner’s *Harcourt*, ii, p. 348.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE MARGOT LETTERS

Engagement to Margot Tennant—Advice to him and to her—A long attachment—Doubts and fears—Many vicissitudes—Marriage—Many letters.

1891-1894  
Age 39-41

ALL Rome offered its advice when it was rumoured that the young Home Secretary, with his great and solemn career in front of him, cherished the idea of marrying *en secondes nocés* the brilliant and wayward Margot Tennant. One half said it would be ruinous to his career; the other that she would irreparably spoil her life if she took upon herself the charge of a ready-made family brought up in a different atmosphere from her own, and linked herself to a man who played no games and cared for no sport; who was bound to live in London and not in the country, and had no income except what he earned at the Bar. On hearing of it Lord Rosebery and Lord Randolph Churchill and other of his friends were frank in their warnings and disapproval, and her friends were equally outspoken to her. The pros and cons from her point of view were shrewdly summed up by Jowett, the Master of Balliol, who on this, as so many occasions, doubled the parts of spiritual and worldly adviser:

“The real doubt about the affair is the family; will you consider this and talk it over with your mother? The other day you were at a masqued ball, as you told me—a few months hence you will have, or rather may be having, the care of five children, with all the ailments and miseries and disagreeables of children (unlike the children of some of your friends) and not your own, although you will have to be a mother to them, and this state of things will last during the greatest part of your life. Is not the contrast more than human nature can endure? I know that it is, as you said, a nobler manner of living, but are you equal to such a struggle? If you are, I can only say, ‘God bless you, you are a brave girl.’ But I would not have you disguise from yourself the nature of the trial. It is not possible to be a leader of fashion and to do your duty to the five children.

On the other hand, you have at your feet a man of outstanding ability and high character, and who has attained an extraordinary position—far better than any aristocratic lath or hop-pole; and you can render him the most material help by your abilities and knowledge of the world. Society will be gracious to you because you are a *grata persona*, and everybody will wish you well because you have made the sacrifice. You may lead a much higher life if you are yourself equal to it.”

Being both people of strong characters and independent minds, they went their own way to their own conclusion, but that was not reached until after many wrestlings and vicissitudes which may be traced in his letters to her during the years in which he pleaded and waited. These were poured out in a continuous stream during the years immediately preceding their marriage in 1894, and only a few excerpts can be printed here ; but they tell the chief part of Asquith's story during these years and incidentally reveal a side of his nature and character which was little known to the public. Much of the story has been told in *Margot Asquith's Autobiography*, but a little more is needed to explain the letters. 1891-1894  
Age 39-41

Margot Tennant's early attachment was to Peter Flower, a man fourteen years older than herself but still young, a fine rider, renowned boxer, and though of small intellectual equipment, a gay and intelligent companion. He shared her triumphs in the hunting fields of Leicestershire and Northamptonshire through many long and happy winters.

But Margot Tennant had another world, the world of the summer season in London, the autumn season at Glen, and the world of a circle of intellectual companions called the "Souls," whom Peter Flower was incapable of appreciating, and who in their turn could not imagine "what she saw in him." Evidently these two worlds could never mix, and the beginning of the story is the conflict between them.

In 1890, when Margot Tennant first met Asquith, she was very unhappy. She had had so much advice, so many warnings from her friends and family, that she had shut out all discussion upon her private affairs, but the farther she withdrew into herself the less confidence she felt in the goal to which her love was leading her. It was then that she met Asquith, a meeting which is best told in her own words :

"When I first met Henry he knew nothing about me, and I knew nothing about him. We were sitting on the Terrace of the House of Commons in the dark, continuing the conversation we had had throughout a dinner given to us by Lord Battersea. After a moment's silence, he suddenly asked me what I was doing with my life ; and I felt as if a gate had opened in front of me. Here at least was a man whose experience was different from my own, who was not likely to add to my embarrassments by falling in love, and who had no prejudice against the sporting side of the life which threatened to overwhelm me.

We talked under the stars until a policeman informed us that the House was up.

My new friendship was not only a great awakening for me, but a delight

1891-1894 to my family and friends. I said to my sister Charty : ' Asquith is the  
Age 39-41 only kind of man that I could ever have married—all the others are so much waste paper ! '

At which she said : ' He would never have proposed to you.'

This remark of hers hurt me : and I pondered over it in my heart. Was it true that my sporting life was unfitting me for something better ? I remember it, because I cried myself to sleep and vowed that I would give up Leicestershire, London, and Peter Flower."

Asquith she describes as becoming an anchor to her in the months that followed. She felt that his penetration, sagacity, and counsel would save her from the self that she had ceased to trust. A little later she came to know his wife :

" When later I met his wife—Helen—she was so different from me that I had a longing for her approval. She was gentle, pretty and unambitious, and spoke to me of her home and children with a love and interest that seemed to exclude her from a life of political aggrandizement, which was from early days the life that captivated my imagination. I was anxious that she should care for me and know my friends, but after a week-end spent at Taplow with Lord and Lady Desborough, where everyone liked her, she told me that though she had enjoyed her visit she did not think she would ever care for the sort of society that I loved, and was happier in the circle of her home and family.

When I said that she had married a man who was certain to attain the highest political distinction, she replied that that was not what she coveted for him. Driving back from Hampstead where we had been alone together I wondered if my ambition for the success of her husband, and other men, was wrong.

She came several times to see me in Grosvenor Square and took me to hear her husband in the Law Courts, where he and Lord Russell of Killowen were engaged on the famous case of the baccarat scandal.

We were accompanied by her son Raymond, and in a desire to amuse this lovely little boy I remember that I fluttered my pocket handkerchief on to the heads of those sitting below us from the gallery.

With the exception of Raymond, and little Violet, I never saw any of Henry's children till after his wife's death when they were living in a villa at Redhill."

Helen Asquith died in September 1891, and gradually the new chapter opened. Asquith's mind was made up that, if he ever married again, it could only be to Margot Tennant, and he was convinced—he sincerely believed impartially and disinterestedly—that marriage to Peter Flower would be disaster. The extracts from his letters printed below tell their own story. With whatever reluctance, Peter himself acknowledged defeat. His parting words were : " Marry Asquith ; I'm not worth the button on his boot ! He's the only chap I've ever known who will make you happy."

But was she worth the button on Asquith's boot? Could she be a mother to his family? These were the questions which she now put to herself:

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Age 39-41

"I was filled with profound misgiving when I realised that the man whose friendship was what I valued most on earth wanted to marry me. Groping as I had been for years to find a character and intellect superior to my own, I did not feel equal to facing it when I found it. I had no reason to think I was maternal, and I was haunted by the thought that if I married him I might ruin his career. I realised the natural prejudice that all children since the beginning of the world must have against stepmothers, and the idea of duty accompanying love was repellent to me, and would be perceptible to a man of his insight and sensibility. Nurses, nature, and fairy-tales do nothing to discourage this prejudice, and having a mother of my own—patient, unambitious, and wise—I felt I was not worthy to undertake the care and guidance of exceptionally clever children brought up in different surroundings from my own.

My friends, who in their delight at my parting from Peter, had missed no opportunity of bringing Henry and me together, were overcome with anxiety that so famous a man as the Home Secretary should contemplate marrying so frivolous a person as myself—and I was cautioned—by all but Arthur Balfour, Jowett, George Curzon, George Pembroke, St. John Midleton, Lady Manners, Mr. Gladstone and my sister Charty—to give up any such notion. I was told that I was not marrying Henry, but his five children, and that I had not the discipline, education, or selflessness to take such a hazard. I was well aware that what they said was true. Fortunately there was something in my nature, as there was in my husband's, that has enabled me always to have a life of my own.

Henry spoke little to me of his children—to whom he was as devoted as his wife had been—as he felt instinctively that my fear of being an inadequate stepmother was the barrier that prevented me from taking my final decision.

That he did not care for hunting, out-of-door games, or the good-humoured, ill-educated people with whom I spent my winters, did not make as much difference to my decision as my friends supposed, but I feared that my inadequacy might ultimately cool his great love. Looking back to-day I think Henry showed far more courage than I did when he married me. There is a side of his nature which few will ever know. Though modest, he was arrogant, he never had any doubt that in the end his will would prevail, and his indifference to money, the future, and all gossip and rumour amazed me. Like myself, he admired those who live dangerously."

The marriage took place at St. George's, Hanover Square, on 10th May, 1894. The streets were crowded from Grosvenor Square to the church, and the marriage register was signed by four Prime Ministers, past and future—Lord Balfour, Lord Rosebery, Mr. Gladstone, and the bridegroom. Lady Oxford relates that her old



1891-1894 nurse who had a card of entry to the church was asked by "a  
Age 39-41 gentleman with a gardenia in his button-hole" if she would sell him her ticket. "I will give you ten pounds if you will do this—I want to see the man that she is marrying." His request was met with an indignant refusal.

The first part of the honeymoon was spent at Mells Park, Frome, lent by Sir John and Lady Horner, and the second at Clovelly Court, lent by Mrs. Hamlyn.

. . . . .

The letters from which the following extracts are taken extended from the autumn of 1891—soon after the death of Asquith's first wife—to the time of his second marriage. The beginning is in October 1891, the end May 1894.

"We have almost completed the terribly sad work of giving away Helen's things. Isn't it strange how the memory of forgotten things—small and great—is brought back to life by the sight of old dresses and all sorts of little personal trifles? I am keeping hardly anything except her books and papers for myself, and a few of her jewels—she had very few—for Violet. But it is like a second parting.

Parnell's death is as unexpected as most of his proceedings. I don't think you and I ever quite agreed in our estimate of him. I still regard him—measured by his opportunities and his achievements—as one of the half-dozen great men of action of this century. Napoleon stands by himself; he has in our time—in many respects in all time—neither equal nor second. But the only others of this age that I would rank higher than Parnell are Abraham Lincoln, Bismarck, and (perhaps) Cavour. Of course you understand that I am not speaking of the goodness (in any of the cases) of the result, but of the width and depth of the changes brought about by personal initiative. Like Bismarck, and Napoleon himself, Parnell lived too long, and the later part of his life was an anti-climax. I think myself that his mental and moral equilibrium was at all times very delicately poised, and once lost, he never regained it.

As you know at one time I saw a great deal of him—more perhaps than almost any other Englishman has done. We have spent hours in these rooms *tête-à-tête*. Like a fool, I didn't keep a diary in those days (not indeed until I knew you) or I could have sent you some very curious and interesting reminiscences.

I hope that your guest will have grace given him to deal with the subject decently in his speech. He was never (like John Morley and me) a Parnellite—except *malgré lui*. I daresay you think better of his judgment and the worse of ours.

What are you reading? Anything? Have you ever read Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*? It is not pleasant, though quite free from the grossness, whether subtle or coarse, of the latter-day French school, who like to 'affiliate' themselves to Balzac, but really go no further back in literary ancestry than to Flaubert, of whom they are all—don't you think—



MARGOT TENNANT AS A CHILD



descendants, legitimate and otherwise. There is to me something almost Shakespearean about Balzac. But it must be admitted that he is sometimes dull. The books I have on the table at home at present are Rose's *Ignatius Loyola*, Moltke's *Franco-German War*, and Bishop Wordsworth's *Reminiscences*."

1891-1894  
Age 39-41

"I never had a more interesting or a *nicer* letter, and you know what I mean by 'nice' in our jargon. There are a lot of things in it that I shall keep in my memory and treasure up in a compartment that is devoted to you; only that it isn't a 'compartment' (like one of Napoleon's drawers) any longer, but threatens rapidly to encroach upon and engross all the space that Nature has given me. Happily it doesn't drive out other interests or paralyse other activities, but it suffuses them all with a sense of sweet and inspiring companionship, and quickens them with the pulse of a new ambition.

By the same post as yours I got two letters which I send to you to read, as you are interested in both the writers—Milner and Bryce. I suppose that after some experience one gets rather morbidly hypercritical in these matters, and I wonder if they will strike you as they did me. I know Bryce well, but not intimately, and I like his letters. Milner has been my friend for nearly twenty years, which makes me more sensitive to what he says, and I can't help feeling a certain commonplace-ness, a slight and indefinable want of depth and delicacy, a lack as it were of flavour and fragrance, both in the sentiment and expression of what he writes. Am I wrong? I would not say so to anyone but you, for I know him to be a true and loyal friend.

I was intensely amused by your description of the Harcourt meetings. About the chief actor I agree with all you say; we see the same things in him and the same deficiencies. As for the *nous autres* of the Liberal Party, I confess that we are (to a fastidious eye) a 'vulgar and stupid' lot. (I know that you make one or two exceptions, so do I.) But you must remember that the M.'s and the rest are the half-educated and semi-articulate mouthpieces of wants vaguely felt and ideas dimly conceived by people who are both ignorant and dumb. They are crying for leadership, and all they get is a rattle of Harcourtian fireworks and a sawdust programme from Newcastle. What we want just now is not so much sympathy or 'awakening of the national conscience'—there is lots of that about—but intuition, constructive imagination, and hard-headed audacity. These are the qualities, Madam, which *you* have got to contribute, and as you say we will some day drive the machine along at a pace and with results that the world will feel. There never was a time when there was more to be done or fewer persons fitted to do it. Of course, we shall agree about things. We never differ in our conclusions, when you give yourself time to take in all the conditions, and I have my pedestrian judgment quickened and brightened and winged by you. All in good time; I am not impatient. . . .

I read through Bishop Wordsworth's *Reminiscences* yesterday. You wouldn't much care for it; it is too full of (good) Latin and (indifferent) English verse, and all kinds of academic and clerical shop. My passion

1891-1894 for biography carried me through. Here are almost the only two good things :  
Age 39-41

1. 'There dwelt among the untrodden ways  
To Rydal mere which lead  
A bard whom there were none to praise,  
And very few to read.'

—not a bad parody of our revered poet.

2. 'Cato—or some old Roman—said that he would rather posterity should ask why there were no statues to him, and not why there were.'

After a visit to Westminster Abbey one feels there is point in that.

I will let you know what I think of Moltke—and of anything and everything I read. I am taking a course of Balzac in bed at night, and am just beginning *La Peau de Chagrin*, which, shame to relate, I have never read before : there's a gap for you ! I knew you would like *Mme. de Rémusat*, though it brings out the petty side, the 'essential cad' in Napoleon more than almost any other book. I doubt your finding much that will help or even greatly interest you in Schopenhauer, but (except Hegel in a few rare moments) he is the only one of the German philosophers who can write readably. Has Haldane infected you with an interest in Lassalle and his Helene ? He is certainly a picturesque figure—Jew, Hegelian, dandy, duellist, lover, founder of the Socialist movement, and dead before he was forty. There is plenty of 'rush and colour' for you there. . . ."

"I had intended to give you a day's holiday to-day, but as you see second thoughts, and the force of habit, and perhaps something elses, have undermined my resolution. Not that I have really much to say—except what you are tired of hearing, but there is no one else in the whole world to whom I can talk freely, or from whom I get in return light and help and hope.

The more I think of your projected flight into Egypt the less I like the prospect. I believe it is eleven or twelve days' post to Cairo. Egypt and India are the two places I have always most wished to explore, but I see no chance of ever being able to do so. 'Ever' is perhaps a long word. In fact I am not much fonder of long travelling than you are. But when you once get there you are bound to be interested by what you see—Eastern colour, the desert, the Nile, etc.—and the tedium will be alleviated by the society of Milner and other well-informed persons. I expect you will come back a hardened Egyptologist. It is all very well to hold out alluring visions of smoke and conversation in a loose-box some time in January. Such dim and distant possibilities are very poor consolation for the certainty of two months' absence, risks and discomforts of travel, slow posts, and every kind of distracting anxiety and fear. I loathe and curse the whole thing. But of course you are right and I love you for going.

The papers to-day all say that A. J. B.<sup>1</sup> has got the leadership and Goschen's speech points in the same direction. In that case the explosion against G. (Goschen) has been too strong and universal for Salisbury.

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Arthur J. Balfour.

It is a great thing to lead the House of Commons at forty-three. But what a singular career! He, i.e. A. J. B., has been seventeen years in the House, and for the first ten at least made no mark—not for want of wishing and trying. Sometime about '83 or '84 he told J. Morley that he had quite come to the conclusion that as a public man he was a failure, and that he had no aptitude for politics. When I entered the House in '86, he was Scotch Minister, but was supposed to owe his office to Lord Salisbury's family partiality and was hardly seriously considered. People smiled when he was made Irish Secty. in '87. His speech soon after in that session, introducing the Coercion Bill, was in matter and style one of the worst I have ever heard. Such a rapid *bouleversement* of an estimate not hastily formed and almost universally held is, I believe, quite without precedent in Parliamentary history. And the qualities with which he is now credited, and to the belief in which he owes his position are (to complete the paradox) the exact reverse of those he was supposed to possess. Starting only four years ago with the reputation of an idler, a philosopher, and a dilettante, deeply imbued with cynicism and with a distinct flavour of effeminacy, he has acquired his ascendancy by administrative energy, by gladiatorial debating power, and by impressing the English imagination with the notion that he is essentially and emphatically a strong man. Perhaps you have known him too well all through quite to appreciate the outside view then and now, and to measure the distance which separates them. His future is a most interesting problem. It is of course a much easier thing to lead their party than ours, as you and I will find if we ever have a share in the work. The function of the Tories in these days is neither to originate nor to resist *à outrance*, but to forestall inevitable changes by judicious compromises in the interest of threatened classes and institutions. They have, just as much as the old Tories had and even more, wealth, property and the *vis inertiae* on their side, and as their game is a difficult one and full of intellectual interest, they admit a vast deal more than they used to do of the higher intelligence of the country. But they need neither intuition, initiative, constructive power (except of a low kind), nor (what is rarest of all) the ability to organise and concentrate the scattered discontent and diffuse enthusiasm of a half-educated society. Given the conditions, I am not sure that A. J. B.—if he will learn to take himself and his party a little more seriously—is not an almost ideal Tory leader. All the same I think him very unlucky to have to start just now. Tell me your estimate of him—it is worth much more than mine."

. . . . .

"Here I am again in the train on my way back to London, and though of course I have not heard from you and have nothing interesting to tell, I cannot resist writing you two or three (very jolty) lines.

I slept last night at Manchester, where I saw my sister-in-law, and went early this morning to Oldham, one of the most dismal of manufacturing towns. I have to advise the Corporation as to their legal rights and liabilities in connection with a large sewerage scheme (interesting I you think) and I have spent the day going over the ground, looking at millstreams, reservoirs, etc., and now (5 p.m.) I am passing Crewe on my

1891-1894 way home. Not an ideal day for an immortal soul, but 50 guineas is 50  
Age 39-41 guineas, and there is a certain intellectual interest in solving new and rather intricate problems.

All the same it is a great relief to escape for a few moments from cogitating over sewers and water rights into a purer and brighter atmosphere, to unlock the door that leads into my favourite sanctum, and to feed the eyes upon the pictures with which its walls are hung. My imagination suffers a little from never having been at Glen. I wonder what you are doing, and what surrounds you, and who you are talking to. . . .

We all think, at least I do, a vast deal too much about ourselves and our own feelings and hopes. When I was at Oldham to-day I was standing at half past twelve outside Platt's works. They are the largest machine makers in the world, and employ 10,000 'hands.' The whistle sounded for the dinner hour, and suddenly the great gates were opened and there burst out an ocean of men, in such numbers that for 5 minutes the streets in both directions were blocked by the moving crowd. I watched them closely as they passed me—a long procession of wan-faced, grimy, tired, silent figures. They get an average of 18s. a week, and work with intervals for meals from 6 to 6. Civilisation and religion have done something for them—given them paved streets, water-tight houses, board schools, chapels, and even (in Oldham) an art gallery. But life in its real sense they have never known and to their dying day will never know. Do you remember talking with me once (at Taplow) about Kant's philosophy? He thought that the belief in immortality and another world could never be demonstrated to the understanding, because all the material of our knowledge comes to us under the forms of space and time, and we cannot apprehend or reason about anything which is not subject to those conditions. But having banished these beliefs from the world of exact or scientific knowledge, he brings them back again as the necessary postulates of our moral nature. The sense of justice, e.g. (he says) is a mere chimæra unless we suppose another world in which the uneven balance of good and evil, happiness and misery, etc. will be readjusted. Some Frenchman (forget who) characteristically put the same thought in a shorter and less reverent phrase when he said that if there were not a God it would be necessary to invent him."

"I hope you got my letter which (not knowing your address) I sent by H. White, not that it was worth reading except as showing you that I did not need to be asked to write. All the same I was delighted to get your dear little scrap—'an air of the morning, a breath from the springs of the East'—and to know from it that you were wanting to hear from me. What do you mean exactly when you say that 'reaction is strong with a nature like yours'? What are you reacting from and to? You tell me not to stop loving you, as if you thought I had done or would or could do. Tennyson speaks somewhere of the 'sin which practice burns into the blood,' and there are other things besides sins which are burnt into the blood, not to be washed out either by change of circumstance or acts of will. We have a trying time before us: at least I have: but before



W. W. Asquith

Mary Asquith

1595





it begins I entreat you never to doubt that, locked and buried though it may be, your place is always sacred and always your own. . . . 1891-1894  
Age 39-41

I had a long walk with Rosebery yesterday morning, interesting ; he told me of Randolph's criticisms to him of my speech and style of speaking generally ; too contemptuous, lacking in deference, saying hard things too hardly etc. ; in fact very much the faults which you long since pointed out. Rosebery added his own comments—very friendly, but acute. He is to speak at the Academy dinner to-night. When do you return ? God keep you."

. . . . .

"You have been good and sweet beyond words to me to-day, and I can't go away without telling you what an absolute sovereignty you hold over my thoughts, my heart and my life. I won't weary you with protestations ; it is enough to say—which I do with the deepest sincerity of unavailing conviction—that I can conceive of no future of which you are not the centre, and which is not given, without a shadow of doubt or a shiver of fear, to you alone.

I don't want you to think too much of what might be asked of you in return. I know that there are moments when you picture to yourself with a shudder a life drained of movement and of colour. I would rather be blotted out of your thoughts and even your memory than be the means of shutting you off from the sunlight and the free air which you need, and in which alone your nature can put forth its incomparable radiance. Don't think that I mean or could ever consent to this. I will give you everything that it is in me to give—shelter, devotion, unshakeable loyalty, tireless trust and homage, and I will take from you nothing but your love. The way of your life shall be as you determine it, and your choice shall be my law.

These are not, as you know well, a lover's idle vows.

Don't be sad, and trust me even now to help and lighten, and not to overshadow, your life.

Write me a line to Englemere."

. . . . .

"Are you quite sure you meant what you said last night ? And if you did, do you feel at all as though you signed your own death-warrant—not to be executed for some time to come ? And in the sober unrelenting daylight would you like to be released and to unsay it all ?

Do you realise what a difference it makes to me ? I ask you these bald questions in this cold matter-of-fact fashion, not because I don't feel as strongly as it is possible for anyone to feel, but just because the subject is so serious, and to slip into a misunderstanding under the glow of pity or the glamour of self-sacrifice would be so fatal. Do you understand me ?

. . . Of course as you said it is all conditional and you are perfectly free, but you won't go about the world *trying* to find somebody and something more adequate, will you ? "

. . . . .

"My darling, are you angry at my calling you that ? You know you are and always have been (even when I stood farthest aloof) and always

1891-1894 will be, whatever happens. Did you like our Sunday at Balliol? It  
Age 39-41 wasn't ours in any true sense, for I saw less of you than Jowett or Milner, or even (I believe) than H. White.

I was rather depressed when I went to bed last night, and lay awake ever so long, thinking of what you had told me about your interview with the old Master. But our talk in the train this morning made me a different man.

I don't want you to think me a vacillating, fitful, incalculable bundle of ungovernable impulses. In truth I have not been capricious or unreasonable. If you had said to me, as I thought you had in effect, 'I can never be anything to you but an unattainable and impossible ideal,' I would have persisted in what I had begun, and ruined my life, and impoverished myself by living away from you. A month, or even a week ago, I had made up my mind that this was to be the limiting horizon of my life. You chafed and I starved under the new dispensation. O Margot—I am afraid and almost ashamed to tell you what it meant to me—lest you should despise me and harden your heart. But when you told me last Wed. night that to you too it was difficult and bad, and gave me your promise, and reopened the door, and restored to life what had become marble and a memory, I felt and have felt ever since like one who had been raised from the dead.

I will do what you counselled in the train to-day. I am not going to haunt and overshadow your life. You shall have the overruling voice. But until you speak it, you are mine—to love, to live for, to worship, to enthrone, with a loyalty that nothing can shake. After all, we have lived together through the best moments of both our lives, and neither angels nor principalities nor powers—neither ambition nor life, nor death itself shall separate me from the best that I have known or can hope for.

I am yours

The place is still sacred, but no longer empty."

"I had a rather grinding and drab-coloured day after I parted from you yesterday—the office, then the Levée, and afterwards nearly 9 hours at the H. of C. But as I sat hour after hour through the dreary discussions on Supply, I could let my thoughts wander both into the past and the future, and a pretty dance they led me, following the mazes and zig-zags of a baffling elusive little figure, sometimes tormenting, sometimes mocking, sometimes full of sweet gravity and a kind of wistful almost compassionate tenderness, but always in all its attitudes, and through all its moods the light and hope of life.

Did you ever feel like that? Not often I should think.

You asked me on Sunday if I wasn't sorry that I had ever met you. It wouldn't be true to say that there have not been times when you seemed hard, flashing a cold light, with a kind of pitiless impartiality that fills one with a despairing sense of failure. But this came from want of understanding. And now I know you so well, and have been present with you in some of the testing moments, when veils are lifted and the real self lie bare in all its height and depth, I can never feel more than an

instant's doubt. No, I say deliberately, that to know and to love you has been the best gift of my life. 1891-1894  
Age 39-41

I can't come to see you, but I know that in all the rushing interests of your life to-day and every day, there is 'at the back of your mind' a place for me. And with that I am—shall I say content? Well you know how I feel. God bless and shelter you."

"You will perhaps think me both unreasonable and ungrateful but our talk this afternoon left me profoundly sad. It is difficult to say in words why, and no doubt it is my fault and not yours. Indeed I have never seen you more serious than you were when we parted.

I daresay my feelings are made rather morbidly sensitive just now, and my mental vision where you are concerned is dislocated by the strong conviction I have that this is, for good or bad, a most critical time in both our lives. I dread more than I can tell, having to go back (and for always) to where we were two months ago, when I wrote on the last page of my diary (after coming back from Cold Overton) 'So ends this chapter of my life.' But the future seems so veiled in haze, which may hide either sunshine or storm, that I cannot even form a guess of what may be before me. I thought I could begin a new diary on May 10th when you made me a certain promise, but I have never had the courage even to buy the book. And there were some things you said to-day—little things that you don't remember—which made me almost doubt whether I should ever require it.

What a pity it is not to be more 'detached.' And I ought to be happy—oughtn't I? for I am just going to dress for my banquet. As you say, I ought to be satisfied with what the world has given me."

"I can truly say that you have not been out of my thoughts—generally in the forefront, and even when I was busiest, a delicious haunting presence—since I strained my eyes to catch the last glimpse of you as you disappeared behind the door last night. It made me very sad, and seemed to empty the weeks which lie before me of all light and joy, when I thought how long it would be before I see your darling face again. But then I remembered what you had said in the carriage: that you do love me and will try to love more, and to do so (I like the word) 'undertakingly.' Then I feel I 'would not change my state with kings' or with anyone on this earth. I stood at my window this morning and looked wistfully at the curve of Carlos Place, round which I have so often lately seen you hurry across the street. It looked bald and blank, and I could almost hear the pitiless sound of the train wheels carrying you further and further away. I wondered what you were thinking about. And this afternoon as I sat on the Treasury Bench, answering questions, I got your telegram and read it furtively, and crammed it hastily into my trousers pocket, until I could get out of the House, and read it over and over again in my little room. Darling sweetheart, you were a true angel to send it. Is it true that you think of me? and 'in the way I should wish'? Do you know what that means to me? It makes me strong and brave; so that I feel there is nothing I would not do or dare for you.

1891-1894 But the greatest thing that I want to do, and mean to do if you will let  
Age 39-41 me, is to make a life in which you can live (not as a more or less tolerable  
form of punishment! you see I shan't forget that phrase) and find full  
scope for every side of yourself. Don't think of me as 'square' and  
'violent,' paralysing and crushing out what is vivid and sensitive in you.  
You know that I can be gentle and tender and flexible, and what you like,  
and what makes you expand like a flower, and I will try to be more so  
and always so—try harder than I have ever tried to succeed in the struggles  
of my own life. Only you must encourage me and always tell me both when  
I have pleased you and when you have been jarred. Will you promise  
this? . . .

What a lot of nice talks we have had these last few weeks—on Sunday  
morning at Panshanger, for instance, and on Monday night out on the  
terrace here, and yesterday evening in my rooms, and in the brougham  
coming home. And yet we seem to have left such masses of things  
untalked about. Have you begun to read your Boswell? I wrote your  
name very small at the beginning of the 1st vol. Tell me how you like  
it, and about all you read, and all the people you see and the things you  
do and all the letters you get and all the thoughts in your head, and in  
fact—all your life. I cannot have too much.”

“Do you feel very happy and peaceful now that you find yourself  
once more in your Dovecot and with the hills you love all round you?  
I have been trying to picture you there this morning, and what came  
back most clearly to my mind was the walk we went together to the little  
churchyard where Laura lies. You made me kneel down with you by  
the grass and we both prayed. That was nearly a year ago. I left Glen  
that night very sad at heart, for you almost blew out the candle of hope.  
It has often been very near extinction, but you could always by a touch  
of your finger make it blaze up again. As you know—though I daresay  
you are sick of the quotation—it has been all the light of all my day.  
You are not going to leave me in the dark, are you? Your words on  
Wed. night, and your darling telegram ‘vibrate in my memory’ like the  
most heavenly music. Am I a fool? . . .

Don't you think it would be rather nice, as I can't see you, if we were  
to read some things together?—I mean read them at the same time  
and then exchange ideas. Suppose we try. I would suggest to begin  
with Keats' *Hyperion*. Do you know it too well? I haven't read it since I  
was a schoolboy. After all, these things are better going over again than  
most of the new books. How do you get on with your Boswell? Don't  
tell me that you find it too long.

Nothing interesting has happened here to-day—an empty House toying  
with votes of money in Supply. I have been to the office and answered  
questions, and bought a new manuscript book to resume my diary! Are  
you writing anything in yours? Mine has been suspended since my visit  
to Col. Overton—Sund. March 12th—nearly 5 months. It seems so  
unnatural not to see you. What effect has distance and finding yourself  
again among all the familiar things on you? I miss you, love you, live  
for you.”

I, PAPER BUILDINGS,

TEMPLE, LONDON, E. C.

It is rather disappointing that you won't be in London till the 20<sup>th</sup>. Send me a message as soon as you arrive to say when I can see you & where - alone. There is so much to say - such a mass (of various kinds) to make up. Of course I shall dine with you at Sir A's on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. As for it is pretty certain to be a feature in town at that time, you will probably have to stay for some days, tho' you will rather chafe at being parted so long from the horses. Thanks for your injunction as to my future tailoring. The picture you draw is touched with an artist's pencil, and but at present I can only regard it as an audacious effort of a lawless imagination, after which my painting fancy will be vain. You must admit that the figure wh. you have boldly sketched - rigged out by Poole in a <sup>old suit of</sup> loose hanging serge & surmounted by

a headpiece & neither crushes nor over-  
shadows the wearer's features - is one wh.  
at present I am by untutored taste can  
hardly be expected to appreciate or even  
to realize. But that hint to your sister at-  
tendre I know you will be as merciful  
as you are strong, and won't compel me  
to 'make up' ~~like~~ a kind of male Lady  
Reag. How is that excellent female?  
I am afraid I rather share your estimate  
of her: & of Ann Dick Ch: whose letters to  
me you perhaps remember.

So you think that SHE flatters me,  
do you? I didn't know it, but perhaps  
that was because it was sabbly done. We  
are all weak on that side, but so far as I  
know myself I don't think I am particularly  
amenable to it. I am not conscious at any  
rate of thinking better of people's judgment,  
because they think or say they think well  
of me. I could count on the fingers of one  
hand the people whose judgment I wd.

defer to in important matters: you  
(in most), Holdane (in a good many), J.  
Hurley (in some), Forrester (in one or two).  
There is hardly anybody else: Green is  
dead: tho' there are some things as to wh. I  
shd always greatly value Milner's opinion.  
- his head is very clear, & his mind moves  
with beautiful precision & at the pace  
of a thoroughbred. I am glad you have  
taken to him so much. It is quite a  
different thing being fond of people or even  
respecting their conclusions, & giving such  
weight to them that the fact that e.g. they  
disapprove a particular course of action  
counts in itself with you as a reason  
apt so acting. All the critical decisions  
of my life I have taken at my own risk and  
usually against the advice of the most pru-  
dent & long-headed of my friends e.g. getting  
married, going into Parliament, taking  
silk. In both the two latter cases Holdane  
almost alone among my intimate friends



was strong for the bold course, & in both  
he & I were right. Helen never tried to in-  
fluence my decision in such things, but  
when it was taken no one could have been  
so sympathetic & uncompensating & loyal.  
One of the things that I fell in love with  
in you (one!) was the mixture of imagina-  
tive courage with practical sagacity: a  
most rare combination in my experience  
& hardly ever met with in a woman.

Am I getting terribly egotistic? You  
didn't encourage me to talk about myself.  
Besides everything here is stagnant beyond  
description. The death of Sir W. White may  
remove Baring to Constantinople, tho' Wolff  
seems to be more likely: perhaps even down-  
down. Hartington is now D of Devonshire;  
in one year 3 of the 4 parties in the House have  
lost their leaders (Smith, Parnell, Hartington)  
& his G. remains! I still read Balzac for  
thru if possible my admiration increases.  
I go to Scotland on Sat & shall stay at Waldron's  
till Monday ~~then I go to Fife~~ <sup>then I go to Fife</sup> ~~then I go to Fife~~  
asking me to go to Fife, but that is impossible.  
Hald. & I are going to show the Radical Unionist

“ Almost for the first time in my life I feel as if I could not distinguish dreams from realities. The thing has come which I have most longed for, waited for, prayed for, *willed*, as I never did with any other aim or object in my life. And yet it seems at one moment so strange, and at another so familiar and natural that my whole mental vision is out of perspective, and I cannot describe because I cannot see. Is this what you used to call being upset, in the days when you invented for my benefit your Himalayan adjective ‘upsettable’? You know me better now. 1891-1894  
Age 39-41

Looking back on our talk yesterday I find, of course, that I left many things unspoken. The one that I should most like to have said, if I could have found words, you can guess. It was better to be business-like, matter-of-fact, even frigid—as I think I was. For how could I ever tell you what you have been to me—at once the hope and despair of my life, so near and so far, revealing to me the unseen and unattained, now opening and now seeming to shut the gate of paradise. This you have been, and now you have given me the key, which you won’t and can’t take back again. I swear you shall never repent it. Whatever happiness the will, the tenderness, and the worship of a man can bring shall encircle you. To that I pledge my soul and devote my life.

Will you promise me one thing—only one to-day!—to please me very much. Don’t strain or make any effort, but try and feel at rest. Things will come gradually—perhaps even more easily than one fancies. You may trust me not to force the pace.

But O my sweet, when shall I see you again? Don’t make it *too* long. Would Sunday week (28th) at Cold Overton be indecently and unreasonably and dangerously soon?

After I parted from you I went a walk through the wet streets and tried, rather ineffectually, to put my thoughts in order and pull myself together. I had to face a little dinner party which I was giving here, and of which I forgot to tell you. My guests were the Alfred Lytteltons and Sarah (who is staying with them), the Pauls, Acland, and G. Curzon. It went off very well, and they stayed late. Paul and G. C. were very amusing. I was not in the mood to contribute much. . . .

This evening I am going to Redhill for the night to see the children. Bertie and Arthur go back to school to-morrow; Raymond not till Wednesday. They have had a pretty good holiday, and have taken to photography with fairly successful results. I come back here to-morrow morning and dine in the evening with Haldane. On Sat. I shall probably go down again to Redhill for the Sunday, and on Mond. afternoon (as I said) to Easton Grey. Write to Mount Street until after Monday.

Tell me everything you do and who you write to. I don’t propose to tell anyone but Charty<sup>1</sup> at present.”

“ What am I to say to you on your birthday? There is no good or perfect gift I do not wish for you in the year which you are beginning, and which promises to be the most momentous in your life and mine. My thoughts go back to this day last year when I remember well what I

<sup>1</sup> Lady Ribblesdale.

1891-1894 wrote to you. At that time I felt instinctively that the sky was beginning  
 Age 39-41 to cloud over my head, and that faintly but quite perceptibly the light of my life was withdrawing itself. A month later my forebodings were realised, and the darkness came. I was miserable—starved and frozen in spirit, driven in upon myself, only to find blankness and barrenness and to feel that I could not live without you. You were not happy—not really happy. So once more we drew near to one another. Then came the summer which brought you no rest, ending in that tumultuous week at Glen which we shall neither of us ever forget. But through it all, then and always, you were noble, true to yourself, disdaining the illusions and deceptions and make-believes in which the weak find a sorry and crumbling refuge. You would not lie to yourself, nor to me. And now I feel that all the pain and anxiety, the doubts and fears, the shiftings between hope and despair, were well worth while: for through them all we have come to solid ground, on which we can stand and rest and build. Darling don't think I misjudge you. I know how much there remains for me to do before I can be to you what I hope and am resolved to be. But you have put your hand in mine and you will not draw it back, because you have faith and hope. I will never let it go, and as months and years pass you will come nearer and closer, and what seems strange and almost hazardous will become natural and even sweet.

Last year I wrote you a little sermon, and I remember telling you that you ought to concentrate your nature on something—either a purpose or a person. That was an attempt on my part to be detached! But now I can only think of you in your new relation to myself. I don't want you to alter. I like to think of your marriage not as a contracting and impoverishing, but (if that is possible) as an expanding and enriching of your life. You will have to give up much—every wife has: but the things you sacrifice shall be as few in number and as unessential and *unvital* to your nature as I can make them. And there are some things which you will have, not to learn for the first time, but to practise in a new way. First and foremost, will you be very patient with me? I know you will find me very slow in some ways and summary in others. We shall not always see things at the same angle or in quite the same proportion. I am quite unaffected when I say that you have so much more of the instinct of insight and of the sweep of imagination than it will be I, in nine cases out of ten, who will be lagging behind. I shall quicken up in time, you will see; in these ways you will make a new creature of me. But you must be kind and encouraging and rather tender—will you? The next, and the only other thing I ask you *to-day* (there are others but they will keep) is that you shall feel *free*. The tie will always be there to keep us close, but I couldn't bear that it should chafe you. Remember our old favourite—the very first poetry we ever quoted to one another, and the best—'Ode to Duty.' 'Flowers laugh before thee on their beds, And fragrance in their footing treads.' That is how I should like you to feel it: that all the order and self-mastery which the taking of a great burden and the following of a serious purpose brings into life, does not deaden its quickness or mutilate its grace, but is only the counterpart of the pulse and rhythm of the stars, and 'the most ancient heavens' themselves, where the 'reign of law' manifests

itself in eternal freshness and beauty, and (as Goethe says) the regular working of the natural forces 'weaves for God the garment thou seest him by.' " 1891-1894  
Age 39-41

"This is the last time I shall write to you for ever so long, and I want to tell you in the simplest words how truly I love you, and how that love grows and deepens every day, as I realise more and more the wealth and beauty of your nature, and the priceless value of what you have given and will give me. Indeed, indeed, I am not worthy, but I try to be, and all that I am or can be is yours and yours only and yours always, my true love.

I am so glad that you have had such a good and chivalrous and helping letter from Peter. You know what I feel for and about him. Strange as others might think it, he has never separated you and me, but rather drawn us together. I should hate you to think that your new life was divided by a chasm from the old. No, you will bring into it yourself, with all that has made and moulded and disciplined and softened and enriched you, and we will share it in the most perfect confidence and trust. We need have no reserves or conditions: we will both be *true* always to ourselves and to each other."

One letter of a later period may be printed here. The death of the baby born in May 1895 was their first grief, and when it was expected, she was so certain that she would die, that she wrote him a letter of farewell. This was his reply:

"I have just read for the first time your inexpressibly dear and touching love-letter written more than three weeks ago. I have resisted the temptation of opening it all this time; somehow I dared not, until all was over. But I am rewarded for my patience, for it is to me the dearest tribute that has ever been paid me by woman or man, and I shall carry it with me as a blessing and an inspiration until I die.

I am not worth what you say or think of me; no one knows it better than I do. But I love to think and believe that it is true that, in the great decision of your life—so painfully and so nobly worked out by you—you have not been mistaken, and that together—ever nearer and closer to one another—we may be able to do more and to live better than either of us could alone.

To me, from the first hour I knew you until now, you have been the best that I have known. I have loved and love you truly and loyally and with all my nature: and now we are more bound together than ever by the hopes and the fears and the loss which we have shared. God make us ever more and more to each other and help us both to do and to bear."

And so it was to the end. In her words, "We kept together in an inseparable clasp of confidence and of love."

## CHAPTER X

### IN OPPOSITION

A disastrous General Election for Liberals—Rosebery's clashes with Harcourt—Armenia—Gladstone's re-emergence and challenge to Rosebery's Policy—Rosebery resigns leadership of the Party—Uganda—Fashoda—Harcourt and Morley dissociate themselves from the other leaders. C. A.

1895-1899 THE General Election of summer 1895 was calamitous for the  
Age 42-47 Liberal Party. Their forces were devastated. Asquith and Campbell-Bannerman survived, and even increased their majorities: but Harcourt and Morley, among the senior leaders, lost their seats, and the Liberal representation in the House of Commons sank, as the result of the election, from 274 to 177.

This attenuated force was destined to endure ten years of opposition. The decennium falls naturally into three periods: first that from 1895 to the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899: then the period from 1899 occupied by that war itself and its immediate sequels: and finally the period 1903-1905 covered and dominated by Mr. Chamberlain's fiscal campaign. The first two of these phases were marked by increasing distraction and embarrassment engendered by the clash of personalities competing for leadership, and by differences in policy in connection with South Africa. These last differences, honestly entertained and (after genuine attempts to bridge them had failed) strenuously pursued, led the party, in the early years of the twentieth century, to the brink of disruption. In the third phase they were gradually reconciled and sunk in a common opposition to Mr. Chamberlain's campaign for Protection, which, while splitting his own party into three factions, welded his opponents into a unity which had seemed past hope and prepared the ground for the landslide of 1905-1906.

It is with the period 1895-1899 that we are concerned in this chapter. Chronologically it includes as one of its earliest and most pregnant events, the Jameson raid; but inasmuch as the raid

belongs, in logical order, to the Boer War, which is treated in the next chapter, its consideration will here be postponed. 1895-1899  
Age 42-47

The divergence, both of outlook and policy, between Lord Rosebery and Sir William Harcourt had been, even before the General Election, growing more and more acute. Asquith came, in later years, to be classed as a Roseberyite: but during the life of the Liberal Government this bias, if it existed at all, was by no means marked. Much of the friction arose (so far as its origin lay, in policy and not in the character of the two men) from Harcourt's demand as a condition of leading the Commons with Rosebery as Premier, that Foreign Office papers should be laid before him before decisions of any importance in foreign policy were taken, a demand which was, in Harcourt's view, not complied with. Asquith characterised the demand at the time as entirely reasonable, and has recorded that in controversies between the leaders, arising from this and other sources, he sided on more than one occasion with Harcourt (*Memories and Reflections*, Vol. I, p. 137). But if Rosebery claimed or exercised a freer hand than this understanding warranted, Harcourt was not slow to retaliate in kind and to overstep, to an extent which no Prime Minister could be expected to endure, the limits imposed by party discipline and personal courtesy. Such at least was Asquith's considered view, embodied in a note in the diary he kept at this time:

"Arnold Morley had urged that R. has no producible case against H.: nor perhaps has he. The full case can only be known to colleagues, by all of whom it is felt to be irresistibly strong: the public only suspect."

It was not surprising, in the circumstances, that Harcourt, during the General Election of 1895, refused to follow his leader's marching orders. Lord Rosebery issued the *mot d'ordre* for an attack on the House of Lords. Sir William in effect ignored it. After some perfunctory references in the opening speech of his campaign at Derby to this issue, he devoted the remainder of it to such topics as local option while Morley descended to the electors of Newcastle on Home Rule. Whether the party would have fared better if all the lieutenants had followed the Prime Minister's lead is an open question: but the action of the free-lances, supervening on previous slights and provocations, exhausted the patience of Lord Rosebery. On 12th of August he communicated to Harcourt his "irrevocable decision" not to meet him in Council any more. On the same day he sent to

1895-1899 Asquith the following letter in explanation and justification of his  
Age 42-47 action :

*Lord Rosebery to Asquith.*

DALMENY PARK,  
EDINBURGH.

Aug. 12, 1895.

*Confidential.*

MY DEAR ASQUITH,

The contingency which we foresaw has arrived, and, in reply to a letter from Spencer proposing a meeting of the late Cabinet for Wednesday, I have written a letter (of which I have sent a copy to Harcourt) announcing that the late Chancellor of the Exchequer and I can never go in double harness together again. Had we boxes I would circulate it in a box !

I do not know that this measure necessitates any immediate results, but I am glad that the opportunity of making the announcement has arrived before the meeting of Parliament.

Let me say one word quite frankly to you. I am more than willing to stand aside, if that should be judged best for the party. Nor does it seem easy to see how in our shattered condition the party can be led by a peer. But what would be worse, and indeed worst, would be that the party should be led by a Commons Castor and a peer Pollux who disagree on every subject and who communicate on none.

Ever,  
R.

In these circumstances the idea was for a brief spell entertained of making Asquith leader of the party, but in the result a compromise was arrived at whereby Rosebery retained a shadowy titular primacy, with Harcourt supreme in the House of Commons and Kimberley leading in the House of Lords. For a year or so this *modus vivendi* creaked along, and a fairly effective opposition was maintained in the Commons to the principal Government measures of the session of 1896, the Education Bill (of which it forced the abandonment) and a bill for partially relieving agriculture of rates. But at the end of 1896 a new embarrassment added to burdens Lord Rosebery already found intolerable what seemed to him the last straw. The Turkish massacre of Armenians in 1894 and 1895 raised the question in 1896 how far and by what method the country, which under the Anglo-Turkish Convention of 1878 had a right to enforce tolerable government in Asia Minor, should exercise its powers on behalf of the oppressed. Asquith was in favour of breaking off diplomatic relations with

Turkey. Rosebery was opposed to single-handed intervention, which he thought likely to result in the immeasurable catastrophe of a European war. But his attitude was viewed by a large section of the Liberal Press as halting and half-hearted : and to his dismay Mr. Gladstone, aflame with resentment at the abominations of the Turks, made the last of his forays from Elba<sup>1</sup> in support of the bolder policy. On 8th October, 1896, Lord Rosebery resigned his leadership of the party, his resignation taking practical effect from the end of the year. He communicated the decision to Asquith in the following letter :

1895-1899  
Age 42-47

*Lord Rosebery to Asquith.*

DALMENY PARK,  
EDINBURGH.

*Secret.*

Oct. 6, 1896.

MY DEAR A.,

I had only time to-day to write a note before the early post from here, as I was occupied to the last moment with a letter to Ellis, of which I am afraid you will disapprove, but which, for ten days past, has occupied my mind. At any rate, I could not describe it or announce it in a letter about trains.

I consider that Mr. Gladstone's return to public life is the last straw on my back, for it gives (quite unconsciously and innocently as regards himself) all the disloyal intriguers in the party a shelter and a rallying point. As to his "policy," I disagree with it in toto, and must say so.

Under these circumstances I cannot speak as leader of the Liberal Party, and my letter to Ellis was to declare the leadership vacant.

From the bottom of my heart I can say that one of my deepest regrets in coming to that decision is the political severance with yourself, for your loyalty and friendship are one of my few bright associations with the last two years.

I hope that, very soon, you will replace me.

Ever,  
R.

Asquith's leanings in this and similar conjunctures were on the whole Roseberyite, and he was certainly impressed with the "unworkability" of Harcourt as a colleague. His name was at this stage again canvassed as a successor to the latter. But both now and later he strained every nerve to lubricate their relationship with one another and to maintain his loyalty to both. To this loyalty Harcourt himself testified :

<sup>1</sup> It was said of (ostensibly) retired Liberal leaders during these years that they had a habit of confusing Elba and St. Helena.



1895-1899  
Age 42-47

*Sir W. Harcourt to J. Morley.* 4 Nov., 1896.

"Every effort has been made by the mischief makers to cause ill blood between me and Asquith, but I have steadily refused to listen to them. I have had every reason to rely on his good faith and will never allow myself to be influenced by gossip." (Gardiner, Vol. II, p. 421.)

Meanwhile, he sought by every means in his power to induce Rosebery to change his mind. These efforts were pursued into the new year. The nature of the obstacles against which this pressure broke itself appears from such a letter as the following from Lord Rosebery :

*Lord Rosebery to Asquith.*

NEW CLUB,  
EDINBURGH.

*Confidential.*

Jan. 29, 1896.

MY DEAR ASQUITH,

You did not convince me the other evening, nor I you. I am therefore anxious succinctly to place before you the position as I view it.

1. I cannot act in partnership with Harcourt. If I have not learned that from my last sixteen months of office, I have learned nothing. I cannot therefore continue the arrangement that nominally existed in those months, but which was so nominal as to be in effect a fraud on the party and on the public. So strongly did I feel this that I determined to free myself from that connection so soon as I should be free from office. I do not impute blame to anyone,—I simply state the fact, which must be obvious to every member of the late Cabinet. To re-enter upon those relations with Harcourt would be not merely to condone the past, but, with my eyes open and in spite of bitter experience, to invite the same result : that is out of the question.

2. Under these circumstances I act as an obstacle, real or apparent, to the unity of the Liberal Party. There may be others, but I am one, or appear to be one, of them. I therefore am bound in the interests of the party and its unity to offer some remedy or alternative, and thus I offer to take a back seat, nay, if necessary, to retire from politics, at any rate for a time. What more can I do ?

And you must remember in connection with this that I have never been, actually or formally, chosen or recognised as leader of the Liberal Party. I was indeed nominated first Minister by the Queen, and I accepted that office at the instance of the great mass of my colleagues. But the party—the rank and file—have never adopted or approved that nomination. They may approve it or they may not. But it is fairly open to anyone to say, "I do not acknowledge Lord R. as my leader. I never chose him. I voted no doubt for the late Government, but I had no other choice, except to let in the Tories ; and I voted, not for him, but for the excellent A., B., or C. who were in the Government. They, and not he, were my guides and my polestars." This is an element in the situation.

I offered, then, in Aug. 1895, to continue to serve in the Liberal ranks as an officer or a private, or to retire. In conversation I pressed on Spencer that some other peer, such as Kimberley or he himself, should be appointed leader in the House of Lords, anyone, in fact, who could co-operate with Harcourt, which I cannot honourably do. My offer now is on the same lines, though not exactly in the same terms : it is equally specific and equally sincere. 1895-1899  
Age 42-47

3. If that offer be not accepted (though I earnestly press it) there can of course be an interchange of opinions with Harcourt through third persons. It will be pleasant if we agree. But that will not constitute me his representative in the House of Lords or he mine in the House of Commons, for that is not a relation that can be renewed.

That is my position as clearly as I can put it.

R.

On 9th October Lord Rosebery made a speech in which he defended his Armenian policy and declared his grounds and motives for resigning. These last, which alone are of any interest to-day, have already been indicated : the difficulties inherent in the combination of a chief in the Lords and a lieutenant in the Commons—difficulties which are insuperable unless a fortunate accident provides the particular pair of “political twins” who can surmount them ; the failure of a large section of the party to follow him in a campaign against the Upper House at the General Election ; and lastly the intervention of Mr. Gladstone, with whom he could neither conscientiously agree nor engage in open dispute. His final injunction to the party was to choose a leader with care, caution, and circumspection, and having done so, to close their ranks in his support.

“A united party behind an inferior leader is more efficacious than a disunited party with the best leader that ever lived. . . . It would not do for me to select any for particular commendation : but I may, without invidiousness, thank those who happen to be with us to-night, for better colleagues no man ever had. . . . If I venture to single out Mr. Asquith . . . it is because we have been in habits of close and intimate political communion, and because I see, and see with pain, that he has been singled out for attack as not having been in hearty association with me. Nothing is more remote from the truth. . . . Those who say that must know Mr. Asquith very little, because consummate and considerable as are his powers of brain, in my opinion his head is not equal to his heart, and it is that rare combination of head and heart which, in my judgment, if my prophecy be worth anything, will conduct him to the highest office in the State.”

The prophecy was fulfilled and the estimate of Asquith's heart was worth pondering by those who had accepted the legend of his cold, unemotional nature. In this crisis, as in that which followed it, his action was marked by an entire absence of self-seeking. He

1895-1899 laboured unremittingly to retain as effective members of the party  
 Age 42-47 those who, from time to time, stood between him and the first place  
 in it.

## II

The two years 1897 and 1898 were almost eventless in the sphere of domestic policy. In foreign affairs they are associated with controversies regarding Crete, the N.W. frontier of India, and the command of the head waters of the Nile. The re-conquest of the Sudan by Sir Herbert Kitchener in 1898, the arrival, when it was barely complete, of Marchand and his French coadventurers at Fashoda, in apparent violation of the rights of Egypt in that region which France had not only admitted, but supported in the past; the reassertion of these rights by Britain against France and the diplomatic strain which it set up between the two countries—this well-worn and familiar succession of events calls for no extended notice here.<sup>1</sup> It was, however, the prelude, and to some extent the pretext, for a new and gaping rift in the Liberal lute. To Harcourt's eyes Rosebery, Grey, and in a lesser degree Asquith, were tainted with jingoism. He had professed "infinite regret and surprise" at a statement made in March 1895 by Sir E. Grey. The latter had referred to a suggestion thrown out in the debate that the French might find their way into the Upper Nile Valley and had expressed scepticism as to any such project on the part of the French on the ground that it would, if given effect to, constitute an "unfriendly act" *vis-à-vis* this country. Sir E. Grey had actually said it would be viewed as an unfriendly act by "England and Egypt," but the last two words had been accidentally omitted from the report. There was a minor storm over the speech in the Cabinet, Harcourt and others protesting on this occasion: but the dissentients fell into line and endorsed the speech subject to the reinsertion of the words omitted. Sir E. Grey was right in supposing that no French expedition was on its way at the time he spoke, i.e. March 1895. Marchand did not start until after the fall of the Liberal Government, but when he arrived at Fashoda, Liberal ex-Ministers were confronted with the very circumstances which, they had agreed, would be viewed by England and Egypt as an unfriendly act against both countries. The "Imperialists" proceeded so to view it and the logic of this view required them to support the Government, as they did, in insisting on the withdrawal of

<sup>1</sup> It was dealt with by Asquith in speeches at Leven on 13th October and at Sunderland on 23rd November, 1898.

the French. Yet this action on their part was one of the grounds of the *démarche* by which Harcourt and Morley ostentatiously dissociated themselves from their late colleagues. The nature of their complaint under this head, as under some others, was obscure. If Harcourt had thought (notwithstanding his previous assent to Sir Edward Grey's statement of policy) that the French were somehow justified and should have been allowed to retain their foothold at Fashoda, his attitude would have been in part explained. But such was apparently far from being his opinion. Thus on 19th October, 1898, he wrote to Morley: "In this particular case of Fashoda, the French Government have really by their previous argument put themselves out of court." In a subsequent speech he sought, not so much to criticise the action taken or proposed by the Government, as to deprecate any "language of vulgar swagger, or of provocation or of menace" in connection therewith. But the causes as distinct from the occasion of his resignation lay farther back.

1895-1899  
Age 42-47

The circumstances in which Harcourt, with the express support of Morley, withdrew from the leadership of the party are recorded in a contemporary memorandum made by Asquith himself, which may here be given in full:

*Secret.*

*December 1898.*

On Tues. morning the 13th Decr. I received a letter<sup>1</sup> from Sir W. Harcourt, announcing that as "the situation had become intolerable," he had resolved not to "appear in the H. of Commons in the approaching Session in the capacity of Leader of the Opposition." After some rather perfunctory expressions of gratitude for the support which I and the rest of our colleagues had given him in "his arduous and difficult" duties he added in a P.S. "I need not remind you that the key to the whole situation lies in the letter of Aug. 13th, 1895,<sup>2</sup> proscribing me personally." He then proceeded to enumerate the 3 reasons which Rosebery gave for his retirement in Oct. '96, and as to the second (that "his colleagues had not followed his lead so as to put forward the H. of Lords in the front rank") traversed the allegation, by reference to his own first speech in the Derby contest in the General election of 1895. I was astounded at this letter and its contents, for which I had had no previous preparation. At the beginning of Aug. 1898 (Sunday, July 31st) I had talked with H. on the subject of his complaints of "intrigue" etc., at the Whites' at Wilton Park, where we spent a Sunday together, and

<sup>1</sup> See p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> See letter 12 Aug., 1895, Lord Rosebery to Asquith, p. 114: "I have written a letter (of which I have sent a copy to Harcourt) . . ." This copy is no doubt the "letter of 13th August, 1895," referred to in this passage.

1895-1899 having in vain challenged him for specific evidence in support of his  
 Age 42-47 vague and general allegations, denied that they had any real foundation. I fancied that I had left him in a less suspicious and more contented frame of mind. No word of any sort or kind (except a letter announcing Lou Lou's engagement) had passed between him and me during the autumn, and my occasional interviews in November with John Morley—cordial and even intimate—had left me without the slightest suspicion that he shared H.'s illusions, or that they were working together.

On the receipt of H.'s letter, I put off my engagements in the Courts, and went to find T. Ellis—whom I had not seen for months, and whom I found with some difficulty in his new home in Cowley Street, Westminster. We went over the whole situation, and cudgelled our brains in vain to discover the exciting cause of the new development. I went on to the H. of Lords, where I knew Haldane was arguing a case, and talked over matters with him, reading him Harcourt's letter. As we were walking up and down the corridors, we stumbled quite accidentally upon John Morley, who was on his way to attend a departmental committee. I took him aside and talked with him for about a quarter of an hour. I found him at once quite *au fait* with what was going on, and he informed me that the public announcement of H.'s resolution would appear in the next morning's papers in the form of a correspondence between Harcourt and himself. I expressed great surprise, and not a little indignation, that a proceeding of this kind—based as I gathered from H.'s letter to me and from his own hints on the existence of a supposed "network" of disloyal intrigue, should have been projected and carried to completion without a word of premonition or counsel with the colleagues of both. J. M.—somewhat hotly—replied that H. was under no obligation to any of us, and was quite entitled to choose his own moment and his own method for making public a resolution which he had a perfect right to take and announce at any time. I demurred, strongly asserting that H. was (whatever might be said of what we had done in 1894, which I for one was quite prepared to justify) under obligations, created by our loyal support of him during the last three years, not to take a step so injurious to the party, and so inopportune in point of time and occasion, without taking us into his confidence. We had an unsatisfactory and not very agreeable interview, tho' we parted upon perfectly friendly terms.

In the evening I went down to Leicestershire to see my wife, and talk over the matter with her.

The next morning (Wed. 14th Dec.) the correspondence between H. and J. M. appeared in all the papers.

Their letters, dated ostensibly the 8th and 10th Dec., were obviously prearranged and written in concert. Indeed one humorous observer, whom I met, suggested that, by mistake, each of the two correspondents had by a slip put his signature to the wrong letter.

Ellis and Haldane, whom I saw in the course of the day, were each of them strong that, so far as the Opposition leadership in the Commons was concerned, I was the proper successor.

From the first, this was not my own view. On personal grounds it is impossible for me without a great and unjustifiable sacrifice of the interests of my family to take a position which—if it is to be properly

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filled—would cut me off from my profession and leave me poor and pecuniarily dependent. On public and party grounds, I doubt whether at this moment and under existing political conditions, I would not render as good service as second in command as in the position of leader. From every point of view I thought that the best choice our party could make was Campbell-Bannerman.

It was, however, not easy to form a cool and unbiased judgment in the face of proceedings stamped, as it seemed to me, by cowardice and egotism, and undignified by even the faintest tincture of a sense of public duty.

Thursday (Dec. 15) was occupied mainly in the attempt to collect my thoughts as to what was—I will not say the best—but the least dangerous and embarrassing thing to say at the meeting at Birmingham the following evening, which I was under an engagement of long standing to attend.

During the whole of these three days—with the exception of a brief and colourless interview with Bryce—I had not a word of communication or counsel with any of my late colleagues in the Cabinet.

On Friday Dec. 16 I went down to Birmingham—in as “tight” a situation as has perhaps befallen any party politician in our time. On that morning I had a second letter<sup>1</sup> from Harcourt, in rejoinder to my answer to his first, the substance of my answer being (apart from a warm and quite genuine acknowledgment of his personal kindness) that I “knew of nothing in the condition of our party—either in the H. of Commons or outside—which enabled me to understand why he had selected this moment to form or to announce the resolution at which he said he had arrived.” I added that the matters referred to in his P.S. were all of old standing. To this he replied that a course of intrigue had been to his knowledge “long and carefully organised” to undermine his authority and to make his position “unbearable and impossible.” By way of justifying his innuendoes, he spoke of his “whips” (meaning apparently R. Ferguson and W. MacArthur) “speaking and voting against him,” and added that he supposed that the choice of a new leader would involve a demand for a “new programme” which meant that “all the old heads of the Liberal creed are to be thrown over.” As for him, he stuck to the “old faith” and was resolved to “go down with the old ship.” He had not consulted me because he did not wish to compromise my future, and was supremely happy at two things—“Lou Lou’s impending slavery and my own prospective freedom.”

I found on my arrival at B’ham that the National Liberal Federation, which had met there in the afternoon, had conducted itself with great discretion, and I faced a huge meeting in the Town Hall with a speech prepared (as to language) with extreme and unusual care, and perhaps for that reason, both in form and matter not very inspiring. I thought it right (after dealing cautiously with the question of the leadership) to state, as clearly as I could, what I believed to be the true lines of Liberal policy both as to foreign affairs and as to Ireland. It was a great satisfaction and support to have my wife with me, and she made (in my absence at an overflow meeting) what everybody who heard it considered a most moving and effective reply to the vote of thanks.

We came back to London the next morning (Sat. Dec. 17th) and Ellis

<sup>1</sup> See p. 123.

1895-1899 and Haldane came to lunch. There was much discussion between us as to the possibility of my leaving the Bar and leading the party, but we all agreed that in the first instance the lead ought to be offered to Campbell-Bannerman, whom I and all would loyally support.

The same day I had a letter from Acland, strongly condemning what had been done and on the following Monday (19th) one in a similar sense of greater length from Fowler. H. in one of his communications to F. said that the resolution now announced had been formed 4 months ago. I wrote that day (19th) to Campbell-Bannerman, re-stating my own view of the situation, urging him if he could see his way to it to take the lead, and assuring him in that event of my own loyal support.

On the 21st (Wed.) I received his reply.<sup>1</sup> His criticism of the "performance of the twin brethren" was not wanting in strength or pertinence, and as to the future his words were: "I am not my own candidate and will do my best to help another far more merrily than I should ask help for myself." On the whole I gathered that he had an open mind as to his own position. I read the letter to Fowler, who called on me the same afternoon at the Temple, and he took the same view of it. We talked over the whole case, and he expressed the opinion that there were only two possible successors to H., C.-B. or myself, and added warmly that he was perfectly content to serve loyally with either. I told him that in my opinion C.-B. had from every point of view the prior claim: that to me personally to take the place now would from a private and family point of view be a very serious matter; and in the end he agreed to write to C.-B. himself in the same sense as I had already done.

(Signed) H. H. A.

The letters referred to in Asquith's memorandum were as follows:

*Sir William Harcourt to Asquith.*

MALWOOD,

LYNDHURST.

Dec. 12, '98.

*Secret.*

MY DEAR ASQUITH,

The transactions that are going on secretly and publicly on the subject of the future leadership have led me to a decision about it that will not surprise you. The situation has been intolerable. I have resolved not to appear in the House of Commons in the approaching session in the capacity of Leader of the Opposition.

I need not say I have no intention of leaving Parliament but I have come to the conclusion that I can render more service to the Liberal Party and the country in the independent position of a Private Member.

I wish at the same time to thank you and the rest of my colleagues for the support which you have given me in the arduous and difficult duty which I have been called upon for some years to discharge.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 127.

I must beg you to treat this communication *as absolutely secret* until the public announcement which must be immediate. 1895-1899  
Age 42-47

Yours sincerely,

W. V. HARCOURT.

*Secret.*

I need not remind you that the key to the whole situation lies in the letter of August 13th, '95, proscribing me personally and saying that "his political connection with Harcourt had terminated and could never be renewed in any shape or form." He made it the condition of his remaining leader that I should be *chassé* and expected that my colleagues would concur with him, which they did. He then ceased to have any communication with us, though still remaining leader in name. When he publicly resigned in October 1896 he had not acted with us for 14 months.

The reasons he gave for his resignation were these :

- (1) That the Party outside had treated him badly.
- (2) That his colleagues had not followed his lead so as to put forward the House of Lords in the front rank.

As far as I am concerned this is absolutely untrue. In my first and principal speech to my constituents at Derby at the Dissolution, having referred to the various items of the programme I concluded by emphatically declaring that first and before all things the H. of Lords must be dealt with.

- (3) Mr. Gladstone's conduct about Armenia.

I suppose all this must now be made public as I do not choose to have it said that it is my fault.

*Sir William Harcourt to Asquith.*

MALWOOD,

LYNDHURST.

Dec. 14, '98.

*Secret.*

MY DEAR ASQUITH,

I have to thank you very sincerely for the kind tone of your letter towards myself personally. From the first moment I had the advantage of your friendship I have greatly appreciated your abilities and valued the warmth of your heart.

I am sorry you do not altogether approve the course I have found it necessary to adopt. I have letters to-day from Kimberley, Bryce and C.-Bannerman who say they are not surprised at the decision I have taken.

I do not suppose you have the means which I possess of knowing the way the "oracle" has been worked and the network of intrigue which has been long and carefully organised to undermine my authority and to make my future position unbearable and impossible. It was evidently thought that the propitious moment had arrived to strike the blow and that success was certain. It was necessary to unmask the batteries and make them fight in the open. That I think is accomplished and we shall all now know where we are.



1895-1899  
Age 42-47

One of my strongest feelings is a regard for the character and dignity of the H. of C. It depends mainly on maintaining the authority and position of the leaders on both sides. A leader of Opposition who finds his whips speaking and voting against him cannot maintain that respect which is due to his position, still less when he finds the organisation of the party working against him in the country. One of these days—and that an *early day*—you will have cause to be grateful to me for having vindicated the authority of the leader.

I suppose now that with the choice of a new leader there will be a demand for a new programme—which means that all the old heads of the Liberal Creed are to be thrown over and something new substituted in their place. Of course this could not and would not be done by me. I stick by the old faith and am resolved to go down with the old ship.

There is one thing which I wish to explain to you and that is why I did not—as I should have naturally desired—consult with you before the final step was taken. Nothing you could have said would have altered my decision, and I felt that such a confidence on my part would have placed you in difficulties and compromised your position. Your part I feel will in any case be a difficult one. It was one of my chief desires not to make it more difficult. You are young and able and you have good time before you which I hope nothing I have done will mar.

There are two things which make me at this time supremely happy and in good disposition to all the world—Loulou's impending *slavery* and my own prospective *freedom*.

Yours ever,

W. V. HARCOURT.

After the colloquies with colleagues recorded in his memorandum Asquith went to Birmingham on the 16th “in as tight a situation as has perhaps befallen any party politician in our time,” and dealt with these disconcerting events in a speech of monumental tact and masterly non-committal.

In this extraordinary situation the Liberal Party was again left without a leader. Asquith, as has been seen, was pressed to step into the breach, and declined; he urged that in the first instance at least the lead ought to be offered to Campbell-Bannerman, and wrote to him in this sense. Campbell-Bannerman's reply, which is summarised in the memorandum, deserves to be set out in extenso:

*Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman to Asquith.*

BELMONT CASTLE,

MEIGLE,

SCOTLAND.

*Private.*

20 Dec. '98.

MY DEAR ASQUITH,

I am very glad indeed to get your letter. I have felt all this week that you and I would be taking precisely the same view of the performance

of the twin brethren. I do not wish to dwell upon it: the more it is analysed the worse it looks: but fortunately the comic aspect of it comes to help us out of the pure disgust which it first excited. You have located it well in speaking of the nursery. 1895-1899  
Age 42-47

I thought you got most admirably out of a most awkward position at Birmingham and I was particularly pleased with your protest against the implied (or almost open) accusation of disloyalty on our part.

How much more dignified and easier it would have been if the big man had written a simple note to Ellis, alleging advancing years, failing sight, loss of Lou Lou, &c. &c. as reason for not going on. I never knew a more gratuitous bungle than the whole thing. But we can laugh over it at our leisure. From all I hear it has been badly taken in the country—especially the antistrophe of Melibœus.

The situation is hideous. I can honestly reciprocate every word you say. I am not my own candidate, and will do my best to help another far more merrily than I should ask help for myself. I really do not know what may come of it, and can only hope that the weeks as they pass may have a settling effect.

But the big salmon will always be sulking under his stone, and ready for occasional plunges which will not always be free from a sinister intention. This is only human.

Tom Ellis has written to me suggesting that I, as senior, should call together the ex-Ministers by and by, in prospect of a party meeting. I have told him it would better come from him and have asked him whom he means by ex-Ministers. You, me, Fowler, Bryce—(the fewer men the greater share of honour)—? J. M., and ??? the big fish. If the latter our lot will be worse than ever.

And as to enlarging the circle, we should get into a bag of trouble.

There is plenty of time for considering this.

I have no doubt that we poor ex-Cabinets at least shall have no difficulty, whoever may be nominal leader, in holding together and steering straight.

Very truly yours,

H. C.-B.

Eccentricity of handwriting please set down to the fact that I write from bed, and have never acquired the art of it. A violent cold, merely, and passing off.

The reader can be left to judge for himself of the conduct of the parties to these transactions. Asquith's own line seems above reproach. The party gathering together its battered and mutilated forces, fell into line under its new leader, and moved patiently forward to meet its next crisis.

### III

In 1895, Asquith, as ex-Cabinet Minister (in violation of all precedent) returned to the Bar and continued in substantial leading

1895-1899  
Age 42-47

practice until in 1905 politics claimed him entirely. Abhorring as he did appeals to sentiment and prejudice, he was less fitted by nature and inclination for rough-and-tumble work before juries than for the argument of pure points of law before appellate courts, and it was in the highest of these—the House of Lords and the Privy Council—that his services were most in request. As Lord Russell of Killowen on one occasion said to Mrs. Asquith: “Before a cultured tribunal your husband is the finest advocate we have; but he cannot play down to a jury.” In Indian appeals to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council he and Haldane for many years practically divided the lead. He did not, however, specialise in this or any other class of work, but did a large miscellaneous business which included much Railway litigation, while occasionally he appeared in sensational cases of the kind which provoke headlines. He had, for instance, before becoming Home Secretary, figured in the famous Gordon Cumming baccarat case, and, after his return to the Bar, took a prominent part in the proceedings connected with Whittaker Wright. Among cases of first-rate legal importance he was leading Counsel on behalf of the losing side in *Cartill v. The Carbolic Smoke Ball Company, Limited*,<sup>1</sup> while among cases combining legal and popular interest may be mentioned *Hawke v. Dunn*, and *Powell v. Kempton Park Race-course Company, Limited*. In these two cases he failed (after an impressive cleavage of judicial opinion, persisting up to the House of Lords) to establish the not unpalatable proposition that an “unroofed enclosure adjoining a race-course and resorted to by bookmakers and the general public for the purpose of making bets” was a “place kept and used for betting” within the Betting Act 1853. An interchange between him and the Bench which took place in one phase of this prolonged struggle, illustrates his readiness in verbal fence:

Mr. Justice R. S. Wright: “Supposing I were to give you an area marked by meridians of longitude, would that constitute a place in your opinion, Mr. Asquith?”

H. H. A.: “That, my Lord, would be merely a matter of degree.”

His income from the Bar during this decennium fluctuated between £5000 and £10,000 a year. When it is remembered that the fees of to-day are nearly double those ruling in the 1890's, that he always gave half of his time to politics, and that barristers' incomes are commonly greatly exaggerated, his earnings must be

<sup>1</sup> 1892, 2 Q. B. 484.

regarded as very considerable, without being sensational. It has been recorded elsewhere<sup>1</sup> how he felt himself bound to reject in December 1905 a ten thousand guinea brief in a case which would have involved his going to Egypt. Mr. Balfour's Government had resigned and he thought his presence in London imperatively required.

<sup>1</sup> Page 171.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE BOER WAR

The seeds of War—The Raid—The Inquiry—Chamberlain's policy—The ultimatum—Asquith's attitude—In accord at first with Campbell-Bannerman—Early course of War—The Khaki Election—Schism within the Liberal Party—"Methods of Barbarism"—Asquith's protest—Lord Rosebery's incursion—A gastronomic duel—The Liberal League—Asquith's moderating and reconciling influence—A word about Liberal Imperialism. C. A.

1899-1902  
Age 47-50

THE immediate genesis of the Boer War lay in the Jameson Raid in 1895, in the failure of the Government in the next year or two adequately to punish those who were responsible for it, in the negotiations of 1897-1899 regarding the Outlanders' grievances, and finally in President Kruger's ultimatum in October 1899. Its remoter roots were embedded in the grandiose imperial schemes of Cecil Rhodes, complicated by the discovery of gold and diamonds in the Transvaal.

Rhodes, who was at the time of the Raid Prime Minister of Cape Colony and Chairman of the Chartered Company, had for years cherished the dream of a British South Africa stretching from the Cape to the Zambesi. By an extraordinary display of energy, vision, and diplomatic skill he had, by the year 1895, brought this ideal within measurable distance of fulfilment. The forces which opposed it were concentrated on the Transvaal Republic, but their resistance had at every stage so far been frustrated and overreached by his policy of peaceful encirclement. Cut off from the sea both on the East and the West, intercepted and forestalled in the North, President Kruger and his burghers now occupied a forlorn enclave in an almost unbroken tract of alien, and mostly British territory. It speaks much for Rhodes' tact that in every phase of this comprehensive adventure he carried with him the favourable opinion or friendly neutrality of the Cape Dutch.

Meanwhile the soil of the Transvaal had disclosed its unsuspected mineral treasures, and these had attracted to the Rand a large body of foreign immigrants bent on their exploitation. The desire of Rhodes to paint the whole map red found in the "Outlanders" a

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potent, if not too scrupulous, ally. Towards these metoecs Kruger pursued a policy which, while within the strict legal rights of what was practically an independent State, was widely felt to be unreasonable and vexatious. By no means disinclined to let his burghers bathe their hands in the golden fountain, he yet subjected the aliens who fed its sources to civil and political disqualifications which in time galled them intolerably. By 1894 their resentment was ready to boil over, and in the latter months of the next year the "Reformers" at Johannesburg were actively maturing plans for a *coup d'état*.

The well-worn story of the Jameson Raid need not here be repeated in detail. In the last day of 1895 Dr. Jameson, with five hundred troopers of the Chartered Company, invaded the Transvaal from Pitsani Potlugo, on the Bechuanaland frontier. A sympathetic *émeute* which had been designed to take place simultaneously in Johannesburg miscarried, and Jameson's force was ignominiously surrounded and captured. The Kaiser's famous telegram of congratulation to Kruger did not ease matters, and threatened to draw a red herring of wounded national dignity across the plain path of the Imperial Government's duty.

That duty was clearly first to determine who were the guilty parties: and then to disown, reprobate, and punish them without qualification or reserve. This is precisely what the Government did not do. The Raiders themselves had been handed over to it to deal with: but although they were brought to trial before the Lord Chief Justice and some of them, including Dr. Jameson, convicted, the sentence they received was mild in proportion to the enormity of the offence, and was further lightened by active demonstrations of public sympathy. But were they the sole offenders? Was there no one behind them? Rumour attributed complicity in the transaction to two other persons—Cecil Rhodes and the Colonial Secretary himself. The Inquiry by a Select Committee which opened in the autumn of 1896 and continued its investigations during 1897 was largely directed to the ascertainment of these matters, but left some of them in a tantalising, and what seemed almost a studied, obscurity. Rhodes' participation was beyond dispute. It had been the subject of a previous investigation in Cape Colony, whose findings he had substantially accepted as true. He was shown to be a consenting party to the intended rising at Johannesburg, a consenting party to the co-operation with this rising, at the proper time, of Jameson and his force: and only not a consenting party as regards the time at which Jameson had elected to strike. It was

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clear that he had through the Chartered Company supplied the conspirators with funds. It further appeared that after the Raid he was implicated in the forged or misdated telegram of invitation, whereby the Johannesburg Reformers had purported to invoke the assistance of Jameson to protect their wives and children. But with regard to the complicity of the Colonial Secretary the Inquiry pursued a more puzzling course. The Committee approached the point, only to recede from it when disclosures seemed to impend. Corners of the curtain were lifted and inexplicably dropped again. Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman and Sir William Harcourt—the representatives of the Opposition on the Committee—were criticised for not pressing their investigations under this head with more insistence, and suggestions (unfounded in fact) were not wanting that they had in some way been muzzled by appeals to their patriotic discretion. When Mr. Hawksley, Rhodes' solicitor, declined to produce what might have been highly material telegrams, his "contumacy" was, strangely, treated as a ground for acquiescing in his refusal, and the Committee for no clear reason accepted the assurance and acted on the assumption that the documents actually produced were representative of those withheld—an assumption which the very fact of their being withheld exposed to doubt. It was freely alleged by the Rhodesians that they had throughout been in correspondence with the Colonial Office, which, they implied, possessed something more than an intelligent anticipation of their movements: and their agents in London had clearly led Rhodes to suppose that the Home Government knew of their projects and viewed them with sympathy. Their tone was that of people who, in the last resort, could make things exceedingly awkward for Mr. Chamberlain. In the result, the Committee categorically exonerated the latter from any share in the Raid. In this Harcourt thought their findings justified, though he retained the conviction that he "knew of and was by implication a participant in, the Johannesburg rising."

## II

If the South African Committee's operations had not been altogether enlightening, there was one matter at least in which its findings had been explicit and emphatic, and that was that Rhodes' offence merited the severest censure. The logic of the report seemed to plain minds, among the Opposition and elsewhere, to require that he should expiate it by penalties appropriate to its magnitude. The Opposition were accordingly thunderstruck by the sequel.

Not merely was nothing done to Rhodes, who even remained a member of the Privy Council, but in the debate on the Report, Chamberlain went out of his way to present him with a certificate of unstained personal character.

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"As to one thing," he said, "I am perfectly convinced that while the fault of Mr. Rhodes is about as great a fault as a politician or a statesman can commit, there has been nothing proved—and in my opinion there exists nothing—which affects Mr. Rhodes' personal position as a man of honour," and he added that "if a man goes into a revolution"—as Rhodes had—"it follows as a matter of course that he must deceive other people!"

This deliberate exculpation by the speaker of a man who, as the Report itself showed, had treated him atrociously, seemed inexplicable except on the assumption of some threat held over Chamberlain's head. It was even rumoured that "a member of the Rhodes group had come to the House with copies of the missing telegrams and prepared to read them, if Chamberlain's attitude had not proved satisfactory." (Gardiner's *Life of Harcourt*, Vol. II, p. 436.) Chamberlain had reserved his thunderbolt until Campbell-Bannerman and Harcourt had spent their fire and could not intervene again in the debate. But the failure of any member of the Opposition to step into the breach and prophesy that after this declaration war in South Africa was inevitable, was in Asquith's often expressed view the classic instance in the politics of his lifetime of a lost Parliamentary opportunity.

### III

Neither the consistency nor the wisdom of the Government's proceedings immediately leading up to the outbreak of war finds many defenders to-day. In March 1899 Mr. Chamberlain had stated with some force the case against intervention. Kruger's conduct towards the Outlanders, however perverse or unjust, was, as Chamberlain insisted, no breach either of the Convention of 1887 (which had given the Transvaal complete internal autonomy), or of the comity of nations, and it had to be one or the other to justify our active interference. From this view, however, he seems to have been weaned by Sir Alfred Milner. In his famous dispatch of 5th May the High Commissioner represented the grievances of the Outlanders (whom he described as "helots") as intolerable and the failure of the British Government to procure their redress as rapidly undermining British prestige in South Africa and breeding disaffection. The denial of the franchise, he said, was the *fons et origo mali*.



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He described the case for intervention, whose existence Chamberlain two months earlier had questioned, as overwhelming.

Chamberlain's reply indicated his partial conversion but professed a leaning, as a first step at any rate, towards peaceful negotiation. At an interview which followed at Bloemfontein Milner pressed for a franchise with a five years' qualification. Kruger, while refusing this, was moved to procure the introduction of measures on the basis first of a nine and then of a seven years' qualification. These and subsequent proposals seemed in July to promise an early settlement, but this was the signal for an outcry by the Outlanders who denounced any compromise on such a basis as a "moral Majuba." They, moreover, and their champions in this country appealed to the alleged "suzerainty" or "paramountcy" of Great Britain as invaded by the claim of the Boers to treat the franchise as a purely domestic question. Meanwhile, Chamberlain had clearly been influenced by the Rhodesian slogan that "Kruger had never looked into the mouth of a cannon," and was brought round to the view that a show of force—a practical proof that England meant business—was all that was needed to bring the Boers to heel.

His policy thenceforward, both in word and deed, was one of thinly veiled menace. War, it is fairly clear, he neither desired nor expected, but thought its fruits could be secured bloodlessly by the means indicated. For the measures necessary to give effect to this policy it would be convenient to appropriate any support he could from the Opposition; and it was no doubt with this consideration in mind that on 20th June he asked C.-B. to see him. At the interview he showed the latter a telegram from South Africa stating that a firm demonstration of force would cow the Boers into submission, and invited his countenance and support for the despatch to South Africa, to this end, of a force of ten thousand men. In this interchange one of the parties—it is not clear which—used the word "bluff." Whichever of them used it, and whether it was used or not, it seems to describe the contemplated move with some precision. Only three days before C.-B. had said at Ilford that nothing in his view justified military preparations. But apart from all questions of justification or the ethics of international chicane, the force suggested seemed to him quite inadequate to its ostensible purpose. One who shrinks from the "mouth of a cannon" may be unimpressed by that of a peashooter: the "bluff," if that were the right term, might be called. He accordingly declined Chamberlain's invitation. Chamberlain, undiscouraged, proceeded to impart

to his public utterances a rasping note of intimidation. In a speech at Highgate on 21st August the Boers were warned that "the sands were running low in the glass," with dark implications as to what would happen when they ran out: and that the Gordian Knot, unless loosened by Kruger, must be cut. Negotiations continued in the atmosphere of increasing tension produced by these phrases and proposals by the Imperial Government were still pending when on 9th October Kruger issued his ultimatum. It demanded in sharp, magisterial tones, that troops on the high seas should not be landed at any South African port, and that those already in the country should be withdrawn: and was immediately followed by the invasion of Natal. Contrary to expectations in England, the Orange Free State threw in its lot with the Transvaal Republic.

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## IV

Asquith's attitude towards the war that followed was determined by the ultimatum. From it, like Lord Rosebery, he "dated as the Mohammedans do from the Hegira." In this he differed sharply from the group of Liberals later designated as "pro-Boers." Many of the members of this group had long inclined to the view that the potentialities of the Empire as an instrument of civilisation were more than outweighed by the possibilities, or the fact, of its abuse as an instrument of exploitation. They scented, in the whole series of events leading up to the war, a squalid intrigue, engineered, in the interests of a gang of profiteers, by a large and powerful nation against the liberty of a small and helpless one. They saw in the ultimatum not a wanton challenge, which no nation, however large, could refuse to take up, but a minor indiscretion into which Kruger had been entrapped by an astute course of provocation. Rightly or wrongly, Asquith rejected this view as fundamentally false. He was not fond of rattling the sword in the scabbard. He looked on the Outlanders with an eye unbeglamoured by admiration and deplored the manner, at once aggressive and ineffectual, of Chamberlain's new diplomacy. But he was quite unable to regard Kruger as a hero. If Chamberlain's hectoring tactics repelled, Kruger's perverse craft and "Arcadian astuteness," as he called it, did not attract him. Both might in the earlier stages have been to blame, but the crowning—and in his view coolly premeditated—folly of the ultimatum obliterated all comparison between them and left the British Government no choice as to their course. And while in all this Asquith dissented from the "Little England" group, neither

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in speech nor in policy, up till the outbreak of war, was there any material divergence between him and his leader. On 17th June Campbell-Bannerman had affirmed on the platform, and on 28th June had reaffirmed in Parliament, that there was nothing in his view to justify military preparations. On 2nd September, Asquith, addressing some constituents at Leven, endorsed these declarations in language almost identical with his Chief's :

"There is nothing in the situation, delicate and even dangerous as it has become, which cannot and ought not to be safely solved by firm and prudent diplomacy. . . . Holding this view, I for one am not alarmed by the irresponsible clamours which we hear from some familiar quarters for war. I do not believe, I cannot believe, that anything has occurred, or is threatened, to bring us even within a measurable distance of a catastrophe which would be a reproach to statesmanship, a calamity to civilisation, and an almost incalculable disaster to South Africa."

This had been preceded by a judicial review of the situation, in whose unprovocative language the sharpest ear could hardly detect the rumble of the big Imperial drum.

In the sentiments expressed by Asquith in this speech, Campbell-Bannerman fully concurred. And later, when the ultimatum came, his leader and he were in agreement that it made war inevitable. Both joined in voting the Government Supplies ; both abstained from supporting an amendment to the Address "disapproving of the conduct of the negotiations which had involved us in hostilities with the South African Republic," to which 135 of the Opposition, including Mr. Labouchere and Mr. Lloyd George, subscribed. While neither of them had admired the tone and method of Chamberlain's proceedings, both held that the ultimatum had forced war on this country, and that a time when the ink on it was not yet dry was not an opportune one for stressing the mistakes, however glaring, which had gone before. On one point indeed they did differ even at this stage. Three days after the ultimatum Asquith had pronounced, in rather emphatic terms, against the ultimate annexation of the Republics. From this opinion he was later converted, partly perhaps by disclosures of the extent of Kruger's secret preparations for war. Campbell-Bannerman, on the other hand, from an early period never wavered in the view that the future of the Republics must be under the Union Jack, though he declared before the end of 1900—a time when such a declaration called for courage as well as wisdom—that they must be granted the fullest possible measure of self-government within that allegiance.

## V

This accord between the Liberal leader and those who came to be called the Liberal Imperialists was short-lived. From the outbreak of war differences (implicit perhaps from the start in the temperaments of the persons involved) widened between the centre of the party which followed Campbell-Bannerman and the wing represented by Grey, Haldane, Asquith, and Rosebery. These differences related to the causes of the war: the method of its conduct: and the state of affairs which ought to succeed its conclusion, though on this point Sir Henry carried them with him in the end. Under all these heads the policy of the Government was open to criticism, and each of them raised for itself the secular dilemma which faces an Opposition, or on a wider view, any conscientious citizen in time of war, namely, what latitude of criticism is compatible with the public interest. For the "Pro-Boers" this dilemma hardly existed. Starting from the premiss that the substantial, if not the sole, cause of the war lay in the iniquity of Ministers, and that the Boers were "rightly struggling to be free," they were spared any qualms about "weakening the hands of the Government" or "heartening the enemy," and could give free voice to their opinions. C.B's position was more moderate and his problem more complex. He concurred with the Imperialists in holding that the ultimatum had made war inevitable, and with the pro-Boers to the extent of holding that Chamberlain's policy had been an important as well as a profoundly discreditable contributory factor. And although at the outbreak of hostilities he had joined with the Imperialists in abstaining from condemnation of this policy, he did not think, as it went on, that the public interest either required or was consistent with a continued reticence on this point. To it he recurred with a vigour and insistence which, to Imperialist eyes, suggested a false distribution of emphasis and a shifting of standpoint from the conception of a war forced on us by the Boers to the conception of a war forced by us on them. If he agreed with them that the ultimatum was what lawyers call the *causa causans* of the war and not merely a *causa sine qua non*, then it followed that the war should be won as quickly and thoroughly as possible: and although Sir Henry concurred with perfect sincerity in this formal aim, a persistent harping on the past misdoings of the Government seemed to the Imperialists calculated to obstruct its fulfilment. The latter argued that once in an inevitable war one must not weigh the relative culpability of the parties to the dispute publicly

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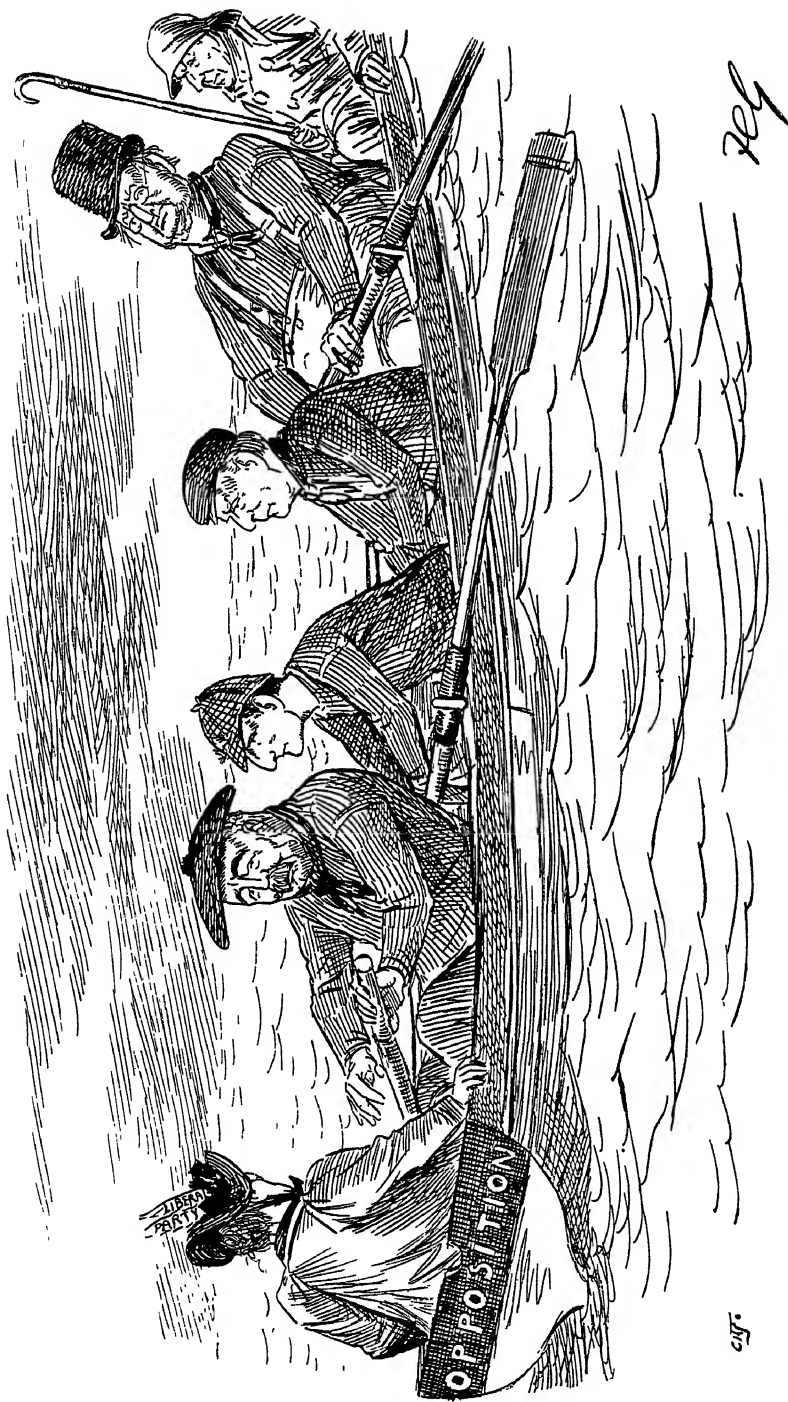
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in a goldsmith's scales, but make up one's mind where the substantial blame lay and disregard all niceties and nuances. Any other course invited endless misconstruction and handicapped the Army. But to C.-B. Haldane's advice to "paint with the broad brush" savoured of casuistry. He insisted on his shades, and resolutely declined even a temporary amnesty for past Ministerial sins.

A similar cleavage declared itself as to the methods of conducting the war. There had been, in view of the knowledge which the Government professed to have had about Kruger's warlike preparations, gross military improvidence on the part of the Government and miscalculations, both as to the scale and the character of the forces necessary. There had been, further, in the first three months of the war, a series of galling defeats culminating in December in the "Black week" of Magersfontein and Colenso. In regard to military failure, C.-B. and the Imperialists both declined to blame the Generals.<sup>1</sup> But he was freer, or at least more assiduous, than they were in censuring the initial want of preparation, the blame for which rested with Ministers and not with soldiers. To the Imperialists it appeared that a constant insistence on this neglect could serve no end beyond stiffening the enemy's resistance. To C.-B. it was part and parcel of Chamberlain's unpardonable gamble and as such called for fearless and vocal condemnation.

The Khaki Election of October 1900, held on the plea that the war was finished, though its longest and most difficult phase was still to come, seemed to all sections of the Liberal Party a gross unfairness, and for some weeks in the autumn, right wing, left wing, and centre found themselves battling in the country against the same storm. Unionists made no distinction between them; Liberals who had supported the war, even Liberals who had lost sons in the war were assailed with the same invective as pro-Boers who had denounced it; the slogan of the hour was "every vote given to a Liberal is a vote given to the Boers." Anticipating the organisers of another post-war election, the leaders of the

<sup>1</sup> The following passage is typical of Asquith's reference to the military failures: "A great deal has been both said and written as to the limits which patriotism imposes at times like this upon free expression of opinion. It would be idle to deny that there are many points in the preparation, the organisation and the strategy of the campaign which excite widespread and serious disquietude, and which ultimately must become the subject of searching inquiry, but in such matters, if I may venture to express my own opinion, nothing can be more unjust than to give publicity and currency to hasty impressions founded upon imperfect information. To seek, for instance, to undermine the confidence of the country and of the Army in a gallant general on the strength of a single error of judgment or a single reverse in the field is to take upon yourself a great responsibility." Speech at Willington Quay, 16th December, 1899.



THE LIBERAL LEADERS, JUNE, 1901

"C-B"

Sir E. Grey

H. H. A.

Sir William Harcourt.

John Morley.

AN APPEAL.

THE LIBERAL PARTY. "Oh, please *do* try and pull together; it's so dreadfully uncomfortable."

(From a cartoon in the "Westminster Gazette")



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Unionist Party asked, not for an ordinary but for an extraordinary majority, a majority which would wipe out an unpatriotic and vexatious opposition—and assured Liberal voters that on this altogether exceptional occasion they could safely transfer their support to the Unionist and patriotic party and be certain that no hurt would follow to the causes they had at heart.

It was in the long run highly expensive electioneering for the Tory Party, for when the war was over, and it appeared that the leader of the party attached no importance to this assurance, the reaction which followed was in proportion to the rally. But for the time being it secured the desired result, and if there is anything to be surprised at on looking back, it is not that the Liberal Party fared badly, but that it did relatively so well in this election. The party was not extinguished as in 1918: the Government majority, though increased to 134 from the 130 at which it had stood at the dissolution, was actually eighteen less than at the previous general election; and if the slogan of the hour meant anything, the alarming fact was revealed that 2,105,518 electors had gone to the polls to register “a vote for the Boers” against 2,428,000 who had voted against them.

Liberal dissensions were forgotten in the common affliction, and Asquith himself won merit from all sections of the party in his scathing analysis of the electioneering methods of the Government. His own constituents returned him by an increased majority, which he took as signifying their approval of the line that he had hitherto taken on the war. For the next few months there was peace in the Liberal Party, but the struggle in South Africa now entered on a difficult and exasperating phase of guerrilla fighting to which orthodox military methods proved unequal. The military policy now adopted of burning farms with the necessary consequence that women and children, thereby left homeless, had to be taken into concentration camps—camps hastily improvised and often overcrowded and insanitary—raised new and crucial questions between the contending Liberal factions. The pro-Boers scouted the official contention that to leave standing farm buildings, which were largely used as forts or recruiting stations by the enemy, was to invite the slaughter of British soldiers and to prolong the war: and denied that even if the contention was sound, it justified the suffering which, if given effect to, it must inflict and had inflicted on the civilian population. In this C.-B. leant strongly towards their view. At any rate in his famous speech at the Holborn Restaurant (17th June, 1901) in which he used the fateful phrase “methods of





parties who had contributed to the "barbarous" result. To convey such an impression deliberately was they thought inexcusable: to do so unwittingly argued a *naïveté* or clumsiness of which no leader should be capable.

But Campbell-Bannerman at this moment was in no mood to withdraw or even to mitigate what he had said. Narratives which had been brought to him from South Africa about the sufferings in the Concentration Camps had made a deep impression on him, and he considered it his duty to persist in spite of the storm which was now raging around him. The utmost he would do was to explain that those whom he charged with "methods of barbarism" were not the soldiers who executed the orders, but the Government which issued them. With this qualification he repeated the offending phrase in the House of Commons three days after the Holborn Restaurant speech,<sup>1</sup> and voted for a motion for adjournment which Mr. Lloyd George moved in a speech that incidentally contained a bitter attack on Lord Milner. In the same debate Mr. Haldane expressed his grave regret that the word "barbarism" should have been used, and the Liberal Imperialists to the number of fifty (including Asquith) abstained from voting. At this point Asquith, who till now had been a moderating influence between the two sections, thought it necessary to make his own position clear, and at a dinner at the Liverpool Street Station Hotel (20th June) he spoke firmly to Campbell-Bannerman:

"There is nothing in the world so uncongenial to me as to enter on any kind of public disputation with an old friend and colleague, by whose side I have often fought in the past, and by whose side I hope to fight again in the future; but the consequences of such a misconception are so grave, both to the party and to the country, that I feel in duty bound to take this very first opportunity that has offered itself to dispel it entirely once and for all. I am speaking not for myself alone, but for a large number of my colleagues in the House of Commons and for a still larger body of Liberal opinion outside. Those, I say, who have taken that view may be right, or they may be wrong. That is not what I am concerned to argue; time will decide. We have never sought to make the holding of that view the test of the political orthodoxy of our fellow-Liberals, and I hope that we never shall. But that makes it all the more necessary for me to say, in the plainest and most unequivocal terms that we have not changed our view, that we do not repent of it, and that we shall not recant it. It is desirable to come to close quarters on this, and I am sure you will not resent any plainness of my speech. What have been the views put forward by the section of the party to

<sup>1</sup> 17th June, 1901.

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whom I refer? No one has denounced with more emphasis than they have that piece of piratical folly, the Jameson Raid, and the fatal neglect—the responsibility for which, to some degree at any rate, must be shared by the Government with a committee of the House of Commons—the fatal neglect to probe it to its origin, to bring the main offenders to justice and to punishment, and what is perhaps more important, to provide prompt reparation for the mischief which has been done. No one, again, has spoken in stronger terms of the incomprehensible inertness with which in the years that followed, the Transvaal was allowed to be converted into an armed camp while the most elementary precautions—such even as the mapping out of our own colonies—were not taken. We have not been sparing, further in our criticism and our censure of that strange mixture of precipitation and lethargy which characterised some part, at any rate, of the procedure of our Government, in the months which preceded the war. We have believed, and have always expressed the belief—if I may quote for a moment words of my own, used upon the very day when the Boer ultimatum was delivered, and since only too amply proved by the event—we have believed that this was a war which if it came would bring to the people of Great Britain neither moral advantage nor military glory. Yes; and so far I doubt whether there is a Liberal in this room who would not agree with what I have been saying. Where we have been parting company with our friends—those who agree with me and those who disagree from me will believe me on this point—where we were obliged to part company with our friends was here—that we held and still hold that war was neither intended nor desired by the Government and the people of Great Britain, but that it was forced upon us without adequate reason, entirely against our will. Gentlemen, I am not asking you for a moment to assent to my view; I am only saying that that was the view we held and hold. I say again—here again differing from many of our friends—that we hold and held that blood has been spilt and the treasure that has been spent, have been expended not in a criminal adventure, nor for the purpose of replacing the ascendancy of one party by the ascendancy of another, but that after the confusion and the chaos of this campaign, which we did not seek, is over, there may arise out of it, upon the scene at present of so much desolation and ruin, the fabric of a free, federated, self-governing South African dominion.”

The Holborn Restaurant had now been answered by the Liverpool Street Station Hotel, and the “war to the knife and fork,” as Mr. Henry Lucy wittily called it, was well on foot. The next item on the Imperialist programme was a dinner to Asquith at the City Liberal Club in recognition of the speech at the Liverpool Street Hotel. That was fixed for 19th July, but in the intervening month two things happened. Campbell-Bannerman called a party meeting at the Reform Club at which he received a unanimous vote of confidence from Liberal M.P.’s and Peers, and Lord Rosebery made a separate and embarrassing *démarche* of his own.

At the party meeting both Asquith and Sir Edward Grey supported the vote of confidence, and expressed an affectionate regard for Campbell-Bannerman, while claiming their right to speak honestly on the points on which they differed from him. On this Lord Rosebery, who had been asked to preside at the Asquith dinner, came out with an open letter "claiming his share" of the "remarkable charter" by which the Liberal Party had "united or reunited on the double basis of a party and undisputed allegiance to its leader and a complete liberty of action and dissent with regard to the one vital question before the country"; and added that he would "never voluntarily return to the arena of party politics." To give further point to these observations, he went to the City Liberal Club on the day of the Asquith dinner, and in a speech made during the luncheon hour, announced his intention to "plough my furrow alone."

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It says much for the spell which Lord Rosebery had thrown over the Liberal Imperialists that their relations with him survived this occasion, but Campbell-Bannerman now had the satisfaction of seeing something like a split in their camp. "It is true," said Sir Edward Grey, "that lookers-on see most of the game. Yes, but they do not influence the result." Asquith for the moment was more concerned to disprove Lord Rosebery's opinion about the fundamental disunity of the Liberal Party than to pursue the quarrel with the pro-Boers; and Campbell-Bannerman was probably right when he wrote to a friend that no one more than Asquith himself wished the Asquith dinner to be given up. That in the circumstances was impossible, but when the occasion came, he very adroitly turned it to account for Liberal unity by discoursing on the need of linking Liberal Imperialism with a policy of radical reform for "little England." This disposed of the idea, which the pro-Boers constantly insinuated, that Liberal Imperialism was a stage on the road to Toryism.

A dangerous corner was thus turned, but the bickering continued through the autumn months, and though Asquith made studiously moderate speeches, Campbell-Bannerman insisted on repeating his now famous or notorious phrase. Then in December came the great diversion of Lord Rosebery's speech at Chesterfield. The element of doubt and mystery which now attended Lord Rosebery's public appearances had caused this speech to be awaited with immense curiosity and interest; and it proved in the event to be a very powerful and timely utterance on the subject of the South African war. Its plea for "a regular peace and a regular settlement" and

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protest against the "unconditional surrender or interminable hunting down of an enemy proclaimed outlaws and rebels," demanded by the die-hards, undoubtedly influenced the course of events; and for a moment Lord Rosebery found himself in the enviable position of having satisfied all sections of the Liberal Party.

Unfortunately only for a moment. The same speech contained passages which, if anybody chose to lay stress on them, were well calculated to set the sections by the ears—this time on domestic politics. The Liberals were enjoined to "clean their slate" and "put away their fly-blown phylacteries," mysterious expressions which soon came to be interpreted as a sinister threat to the radical part of the Liberal programme. More important still, it soon became apparent that Lord Rosebery had no intention of following up his speech by action, or at all events action concerted with the Liberal Party. Various newspapers implored him to come out and lead on the lines laid down at Chesterfield; Campbell-Bannerman paid him a visit to explore the possibilities of reunion and after an hour of cross-purposes retired baffled. Liberal dissensions now took the form of a lively dispute about the right interpretation of the Chesterfield speech. This after six weeks was decided by Lord Rosebery himself, who went to Liverpool (14th Feb., 1902) and made two more speeches, in which he flung a bold challenge to the left wing of the party and said explicitly that "the slate was to be cleaned" (among other things) of Gladstonian Home Rule, and that Irish aspirations were to be satisfied with County Councils until such time as "Imperial Federation should allow a local and subordinate Irish legislature as part of that scheme."

The trouble came to a climax at the annual meeting of the National Liberal Federation which took place five days later (19th Feb.) at Leicester. Taking up what he considered to be the challenge thrown to him, Campbell-Bannerman repudiated the doctrine of "the clean slate," declared his adherence to Gladstonian Home Rule, and asked Lord Rosebery flatly whether "he speaks to us from the interior of our political tabernacle or from some vantage ground outside." The answer came swiftly in a letter from Lord Rosebery in the next day's *Times*: "I remain outside the tabernacle, but not I think in solitude." In a closing sentence he described the occasion as one of "definite separation."

"Outside the tabernacle, but not in solitude." The "not in solitude" was the ominous phrase to Campbell-Bannerman, and its meaning was made clear in the following week when the formation of the Liberal League with Lord Rosebery as President, and Asquith,

Sir Edward Grey, and Sir H. Fowler as Vice-Presidents, was announced. 1899-1902  
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If this League was meant to give form and substance to the "definite separation" and departure from the orthodox Tabernacle which Lord Rosebery had announced, and if it was to provide a rallying ground for a rival leader in a separate Tabernacle, it clearly was a very serious matter, and for the next two or three months the party seemed to be threatened with an irreparable schism, which, if it had gone forward, might not only have affected the fortunes of the party and its leaders, but have changed the whole history of the country, and even of the world. In the light of history, the possible consequences of a lasting and definite separation of Asquith and Grey from the main body of the Liberal Party look portentous.

There were undoubtedly members of the Liberal League who were for this definite separation, and wished the new organisation to promote a rival leadership. But Asquith was not one of them. To him the League seemed a useful piece of machinery to keep within the party the considerable number of moderate men who at that moment had been alienated by Campbell-Bannerman and were attracted to Lord Rosebery; and, though undoubtedly he meant to convey a strong hint to the official leader that his recent proceedings had strained the allegiance of important colleagues, he by no means wished to push the quarrel to extreme lengths. At the beginning of March he explained his position in a letter to his constituents which kept the door open which Lord Rosebery had seemed to close. In this he said that Lord Rosebery in his Chesterfield speech had "defined a common ground upon which, at this stage of the conflict the great majority of Liberals were able to meet. While repudiating with indignation the charges which have been made against our officers and men, and criticising with just severity the manifold shortcomings of the Government both in the methods of their diplomacy and the conduct of the campaign, he has maintained the necessity of prosecuting the war with all possible vigour and effectiveness, and at the same time keeping our ears and minds open to any overtures for peace which might hold out hope of an honourable and durable settlement." Coming to domestic politics he defined the doctrine of the "clean slate" as that of "putting on one side the unattainable and the relatively unimportant and combining the efforts of the party upon a few things which were at the same time weighty, urgent, and within reach," doctrine which "in less picturesque language he had long been preaching to his constituents." Finally upon Ireland, instead

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of jettisoning Gladstonian Home Rule, he counselled a new approach to it which should not expose the party to be wrecked a third time on the Irish rock. Liberals, he said, had to recognise as a fact the repugnance to the idea of an Irish legislature which "not even Mr. Gladstone's magnificent courage, unrivalled authority, and unquenchable enthusiasm had been able to overcome." They must therefore proceed in a more prudent manner :

"The eight years which have since elapsed (i.e. since Mr. Gladstone's last effort) have done nothing to conciliate and not a little to harden and stiffen the adverse judgment of the British electorate. A great deal of loose rhetoric is current on the subject. But, if we are honest, we must ask ourselves this practical question. Is it to be part of the policy and programme of our party that, if returned to power, it will introduce into the House of Commons a Bill for Irish Home Rule? The answer, in my judgment, is No. And why? Not because we are satisfied—who is?—with the results of six years' Unionist administration. Not because we think that the Irish problem has been either settled or shelved. But because the history of these years, and not least that part which is most recent, has made it plain that the ends which we have always had, and still have, in view,—the reconciliation of Ireland to the Empire and the relief of the Imperial Parliament (not as regards Ireland alone) from a load of unnecessary burdens—can only be attained by methods which will carry with them, step by step, the sanction and sympathy of British opinion. To recognise facts like these is not apostasy; it is common sense."

Undoubtedly in this passage Asquith expressed what at this time was the view of the majority of British Liberals, who saw with something like despair the prospect of all their efforts being once more doomed to frustration on the Irish question, if or when they returned to power. In point of fact, the "step by step" policy was the one eventually accepted by the whole party, and acquiesced in by the Irish, for the 1906 election.

If this had been all, and if there were no other implications or consequences in membership of the Liberal League, no objection could have been taken to it by other members of the party. There were numerous associations of the kind within the Liberal Party; and freedom to advocate all sorts of opinions without being cut off from the congregation was supposed to be a special privilege of its members. But to Campbell-Bannerman there was one cardinal point which decided whether such associations were licit or illicit, and this was that they should refrain from challenging the official machinery in the constituencies; and when the Liberal League proceeded to set up a separate organisation, obtained the services of one of the most skilful organisers of the regular machine, and



LORD ROSEBERY AND THE LIBERAL PARTY

(July, 1901)

LIBERAL PARTY: "Oh, deary me! What's the trouble now? And just when we were beginning to get on again so nicely, too!"  
THE SEA SERPENT: "Don't be frightened, ma'am; I've only come up to blow."

(From a cartoon in the "Westminster Gazette")





showed signs of running candidates of its own, he broke out into active protests. Asquith, who through all had remained on friendly terms with him, saw the danger, and now did his utmost to avert it. Speaking at St. Leonards on 14th March he said : " He would have nothing to do with any aggressive movement against his fellow Liberals, he would have nothing to do with any attempt to destroy or weaken the general organisation of the party. He would have nothing to do with any organisation, if such there be, which was intended to promote and to foment personal rivalries and ambitions. He would have nothing to do with any organisation which required him, or anybody else on entering its portals to abandon any single Liberal principle." Lord Rosebery, in the meantime, had declared the League to be a purely defensive organisation to prevent his friends from being " drummed out of the Liberal Party," and said it would be a fatal mistake for them to leave the Liberal Associations with which they were connected. (Glasgow, 10th March.) With this, Campbell-Bannerman professed himself content, and the Liberal League conformed to his definition of a licit and recognised Association. It cannot be said that he loved it or ceased to suspect the operations of some of its members, but he was willing (officially) to turn the blind eye to it. To apply the ecclesiastical language which for some curious reason had got attached to this controversy, it was now tacitly agreed that, though the head of the sect, Lord Rosebery, might be definitely separated from the mother church (or Tabernacle) his followers remained in communion with it. The League in fact quite usefully performed the function which Asquith assigned to it of keeping within the party Liberals who declined Campbell-Bannerman's lead on the South African question, and was careful to avoid clashes with the official organisation.

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Campbell-Bannerman always distinguished between Asquith and other members of the Liberal League. He had the pleasant little habit of applying the term " master " to men whom he suspected of being up to mischief. It was " Master Haldane," and even " Master Grey," but it was never " Master Asquith." The two men had an instinctive understanding of each other and a fundamental simplicity in common which enabled them " not to differ except in opinion." Asquith thoroughly appreciated the little whimsicalities and idiosyncrasies of C.-B.'s character, and always took the straight road in his dealings with him. To the end of his life C.-B. spoke glowingly of Asquith's loyalty, and made no exception or qualification for the years in which they differed about the South African war. It must have been known to him that in the year 1898 when

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he accepted the leadership of the party Asquith was the principal runner-up, and that if he (Campbell-Bannerman) declined the place, Asquith would have succeeded him. Yet in the years that followed he never had the slightest fear that Asquith might wish to supplant him, or betrayed any trace of the jealousy which older men are sometimes supposed to feel for younger men who are close on their heels. On the contrary, he seemed to go out of his way to provide opportunities for Asquith to display his parliamentary abilities and to urge him to take them when, as often happened, he was reluctant. This element of trust between the two men helped greatly in the efforts which both made to restore peace in the crisis of 1902, and was the main factor in keeping the peace which lasted unbroken between them until Campbell-Bannerman's death.

In less than a year the Unionist leaders themselves performed the seemingly impossible feat of reuniting the Liberal Party, and all these events faded into the background. From this time forward no one less than Asquith desired to stir the embers of old quarrels, and he now had the opportunity of rendering some of his most signal service to the Liberal Party.

. . . . .

It may be added here that Liberal Imperialism was no sudden invention of the South African war period. In its origins it was a reaction from the "little Englandism," which rightly or wrongly had become associated with Gladstonian Liberalism, and a revival within the party of the Palmerstonian spirit of the previous generation. In the 'eighties its principal exponents were Lord Rosebery and Sir Charles Dilke among politicians, and Mr. W. T. Stead in the Press: and, in common with many young men of this time, Asquith, when he first came to the scene, was in general sympathy with their views. The special aim of this group was, in their own phrase, to promote a "sane imperialism," founded on careful study of imperial questions, but without the bluster and swagger of jingoism, and altogether dissociated from the whiggery which caused the Palmerstonian Liberals to be ranked as reactionaries in home affairs. They saw no reason why Radicals in domestic politics should not in this sense be good imperialists, or why care for the Empire and its problems should be regarded as the special preserve of the Tory Party. Asquith always objected to writing himself down as an adherent of any particular school. He was, as he used to say, "a Liberal, without prefix or suffix." But quite early in the day he came under

suspicion with the old guard of the Manchester School as a man with dangerous leanings, and, when the curtain is lifted on the Cabinets of 1892-1895, he is usually found supporting Lord Rosebery in his encounters with Harcourt and Morley on foreign and Imperial questions.

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After the fall of the Rosebery Cabinet in 1895, circumstances conspired to give the Liberal Imperialist group a special interest in South Africa. The man most responsible for spreading the fame of Cecil Rhodes was undoubtedly W. T. Stead, and he was largely prompted by Edmund Garrett, a brilliant young Cambridge man on the staff of the *Pall Mall Gazette* (then in its Radical days) who went on a journey to South Africa in 1889-1890, and there "discovered" Rhodes. Garrett at once became an enthusiast, and passed on the infection first to Stead, and then to E. T. Cook, who followed Stead in the editorship of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and afterwards became Editor successively of the *Westminster Gazette* and the *Daily News*. In 1892 Garrett went to South Africa as Editor of the *Cape Times*, and from there kept up a stream of correspondence with his old friends. The appointment of Sir Alfred Milner, another member of the old *Pall Mall Gazette* staff, and an intimate friend of Cook's, strengthened the hands of the group, which now devoted itself specially to defending Milner's policy. When this seemed to be heading for war, Stead fell away and went vehemently into opposition, but the others persisted, and Cook especially was unwavering in his support all through the South African war.

Asquith too was an intimate friend of Cook, whom he rightly regarded as not only a very able but entirely disinterested and upright man, and through Cook he and other Liberal Imperialists were kept constantly informed about events in South Africa as seen from Garrett's, Rhodes', and Milner's angle. The picture presented was in strong contrast with the prevalent Liberal and Radical view which came near dismissing the whole trouble as a financiers' ramp upon the innocent Boers; and Asquith was early enlisted against what he considered to be the unfairness and inadequacy of this summary condemnation.

Campbell-Bannerman was not at the beginning a hot partisan of either point of view, but he thought Milner a dangerous man, and the combination of him and Chamberlain the least likely to keep the peace in South Africa. Thus thinking, he viewed with suspicion all communications between his Liberal colleagues and Milner or Milner's intimates in South Africa, and spoke impatiently of the "religio Milneriana" of which he supposed Balliol men to be the

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special devotees, Milner also being a son of Balliol.<sup>1</sup> On the other side, Cook, who was now Editor of the *Daily News*, warmly espoused Milner's cause and certainly took no pains to conciliate "C.-B." In 1899 and 1900 the Liberal conflict became largely a newspaper war, and many gallant editors, including Cook himself, were laid low before it was over. The high publicity which attended the newspaper war added to the friction behind the scenes ; and before they knew where they were, the leaders on both sides found themselves in a position in which the zeal of their friends made retreat or even a suspension of hostilities extremely difficult. The wrath of both was apt to be concentrated upon the "smoothers" who tried to make peace between them. Asquith, though always a man of peace, felt under a strong obligation to support men who had risked everything in defence of what they believed to be right, and he was easily incensed by language which seemed to impute to them low and sordid motives, or which charged the Government with having made an inhuman and unnecessary war.

<sup>1</sup> The Imperialist cult of Milner—or "religio Milneriana" as he called it—was a thorn in the flesh of C.-B. But in imputing the cult as he did to Balliol men as such, he was for once himself painting with too "broad a brush." The glory or shame of a Balliol education belonged to two of the sternest Little Englanders—Sir Robert Reid and Mr. Bryce—and was denied to his Imperialist *bête noire*, Mr. Haldane. It is true that Asquith was not only an old Balliol friend of Milner's, but had the highest respect for his brains and character ; and in this phase more respect for his practical judgment than he was to feel later.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE FISCAL BATTLE

Mr. Balfour Prime Minister—Aftermath of the Boer War—Chamberlain's South African Tour—Wanted: a diversion—Chamberlain proclaims the new gospel at Birmingham—Division in the Cabinet—Extrusion of the Free Traders—Mr. Chamberlain opens his campaign—Asquith's prolonged duel with him—The Free Trade case as expounded at Cinderford and elsewhere—Mr. Balfour's tight rope. C. A.

THE Liberal Party emerged from the Boer War battered and almost broken. The position of the Government, on the other hand, when Mr. Balfour acceded to its leadership in 1902, was by no means unpromising. The exposure of War Office incompetence which followed this, as most, wars, the precarious nature of a majority snatched at a Khaki Election, the creeping paralysis and waning popularity which afflict a party which has been seven years in office—these were infirmities serious indeed, but capable of being surmounted by an administration which avoided bad mistakes and created some attractive diversion. The mistakes were not avoided. The diversion was indeed made, but its effect was to draw upon its authors within four years an unexampled electoral defeat, and to weld the struggling detachments of their adversaries into a united force backed by an overwhelming majority.

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Mr. Balfour began inauspiciously by introducing in the session of 1902 two measures which tended to reconcile his opponents and to breed disunion among his friends. The Education Act of that year which abolished the School Boards and placed the Anglican Voluntary Schools on the rates alienated every Nonconformist in the country as well as his principal colleague, Mr. Chamberlain. The duty of 1s. per quarter on imported corn imposed by Sir M. Hicks-Beach's Budget alarmed, less by its dimensions than by its potentialities of permanence and extension, not only the Opposition but the considerable body of his own supporters which was wedded to free imports of food. Indeed, the question of the repeal or continuance of this trifling impost was the spark which lit a powder magazine. It was the immediate occasion of Mr. Chamberlain's

1902-1905 famous fiscal *démarche*, of the fission of the Unionist Party into  
 Age 49-53 three sections, and of its partial paralysis for the best part of ten years.

As far back as 1896 Mr. Chamberlain had toyed with the idea of an Imperial Zollverein on the German model. He warmly welcomed the Canadian preference granted in 1897, and the resolutions in favour of reciprocal preferences within the Empire passed at the Colonial Conference of 1902. For a further advance on these lines Sir M. Hicks-Beach's shilling corn duty, ostensibly imposed for revenue only, seemed an instrument ready to his hand. Immediately before leaving for a tour of South Africa in November 1902 he had advocated in the Cabinet the retention of the duty as a basis for a preference to the Colonies, and seems to have imagined that he had carried the majority of his colleagues with him. A strong protest had, however, been entered against it by the uncompromising Free Trader who had by then succeeded Hicks-Beach at the Exchequer; and some of his colleagues—notably the Duke of Devonshire—remained under the impression that Mr. Ritchie's remonstrance had never been overruled. However that may be, Mr. Chamberlain's idea gained on him during his ruminations in the veldt. It seemed well adapted to maintain the tide of imperial sentiment on which his party had swum back to power in 1900; and not less calculated to distract attention from the blunders which had marked some phases of war administration and from what he conceived to be the gross unwisdom of the Education Bill. To these considerations was added one personal to himself. He had come out *inter alia* to collect thirty millions from the Rand Lords towards the expenses of the war. These gentlemen, however, seemed, and ultimately proved, not to be in a paying mood: the prospect of returning visibly empty-handed filled him with dismay and invested with additional charms the idea of some spectacular diversion. Under the stimulus of these reflections he returned to England in the spring of 1903 determined to push his project, and pressed for its adoption at a Cabinet immediately preceding the Budget. Nevertheless, Mr. Ritchie's view in favour of the repeal of the duty prevailed. Chamberlain did not resign. He seems to have thought that the repeal did not prejudice further consideration of his proposals on their merits, and stated that the Government had decided at this Cabinet to "use the summer in further investigating them."<sup>1</sup>

Not being accustomed, however, to let "I dare not" wait upon "I would," he did not himself await the result of such further investi-

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Devonshire*, Vol. II, p. 300.

gation, but on the 15th May went to Birmingham, where he made an epoch-making speech.

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In this pronouncement he declared that the Empire was in danger and would dissolve unless shored up by buttresses of material interest. He pointed out that Canada had been penalised by Germany for the preference she had voluntarily extended to this country in 1897: but had offered nevertheless not only to maintain, but to enhance this preference if we would give her reciprocal advantages in respect of her exports to this country. Such a course involved a departure from our established fiscal system. Mr. Chamberlain indicated in the plainest possible fashion his own view, that such a departure ought to be made, not merely by taxing imported food but by employing tariffs generally for purposes of negotiation with our Protectionist neighbours or retaliation against them. He added that he intended to make these questions the issue at the next General Election. This speech—in all ways a first-class political bombshell—amounted, *inter alia*, to a strong implied condemnation of the repeal of the Corn Duty which Mr. Balfour was, as it happened, on that very day engaged in defending against the remonstrances of an indignant deputation. What, men asked themselves, had become of the doctrine of collective Cabinet responsibility? Debates in the House of Commons in May and June supplied no answer to this question. In them the Colonial Secretary, in the presence of his Free Trade colleagues, developed his policy vigorously in both its branches. For by now to the impending dissolution of the Empire had been added another terror—the desperate plight of British trade. Less than eighteen months before Chamberlain had not only declared our commerce free from immediate peril, but had painted in lively colours its “unparalleled” prosperity and “extremely favourable prospects” for the future. Now, however, the structure disclosed to his maturer eye unsuspected weaknesses, spelling collapse unless prompt steps were taken to underpin it. Accordingly, in the debates which succeeded his first *démarche* he pressed, on the imperial side, for preferences, adding that they necessarily involved the taxation of food: while on the domestic side, he recurred with sharper insistence to the necessity for tariffs as instruments of retaliation.

The immediate consequence of these developments was to reveal a triple division of view in the Unionist Party. Mr. Ritchie, Lord George Hamilton, Lord Balfour of Burleigh, and after some vacillation, the Duke of Devonshire, emerged as out-and-out Free Traders, opposed to all tariffs and especially to taxes on food. Chamberlain, at the other extreme, rallied to him the increasing number of

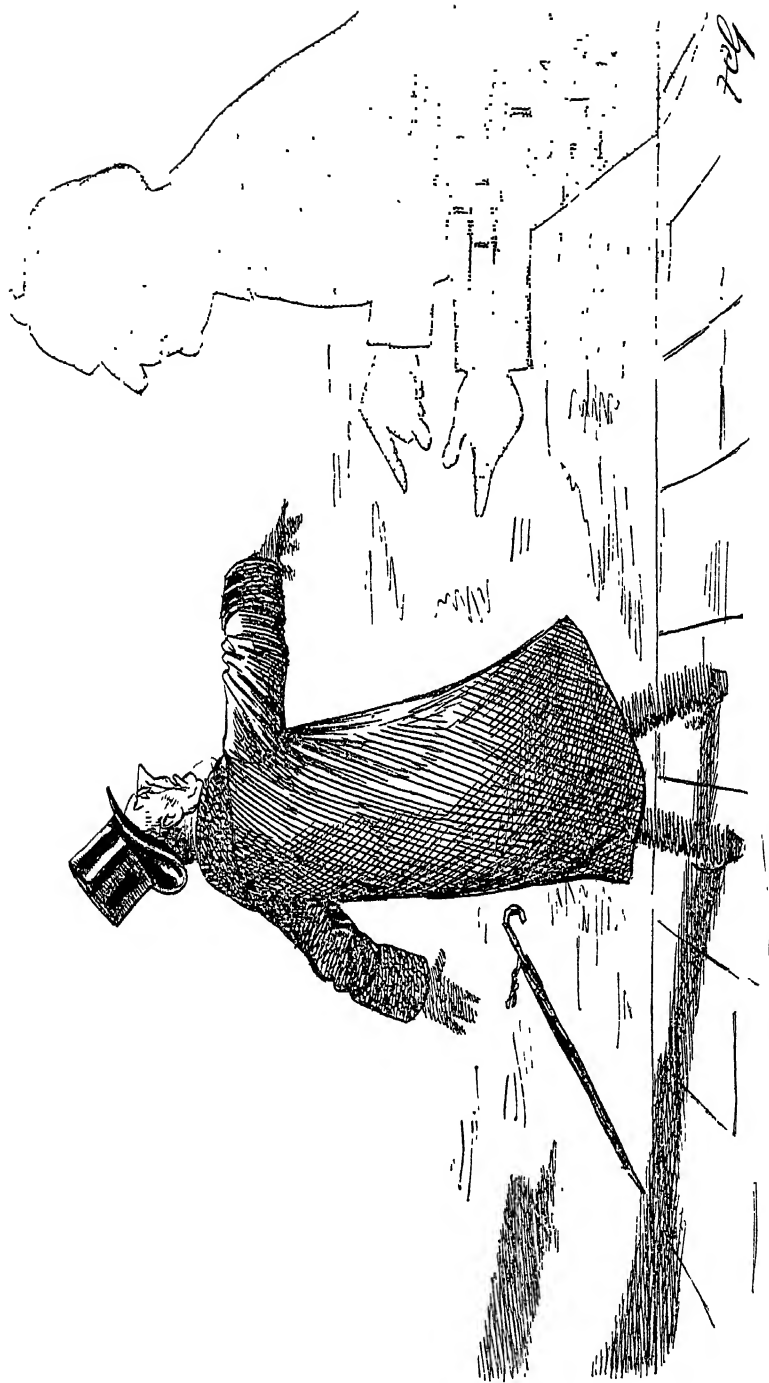


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Unionists who were prepared to go the whole Protectionist hog, though at this stage he laid the main stress on Imperial Preference.

These forces were for a time held in a precarious equilibrium by Mr. Balfour's policy of suspended judgment and provisional non-committal. Striking a new note in politics he overtly declined "to express a settled conviction where no settled conviction exists," while privately extorting from his colleagues a pledge to postpone decision and observe public silence until the material facts could be ascertained by a Board of Trade Inquiry. Meanwhile, in August, he circulated to the Cabinet a paper, later published as a brochure under the characteristic title of *Economic Notes on Insular Free Trade*. In this masterpiece of carefully qualified generalisation he embodied, or concealed, his own views on the question of the hour. Its least negative feature was a leaning towards fiscal retaliation. By September the results of the Inquiry had been enshrined in the Fiscal Blue Book. A Cabinet decision could no longer decently be deferred. The Prime Minister seems from the end of August to have determined that his Government was to be a "fiscal reform Government," but had given little indication other than that contained in his "economic notes" of the nature of the reform he favoured. He had in truth been placed in an impossible dilemma by Mr. Chamberlain: and all his efforts were directed to finding a formula wide and vague enough to comprehend the predominant opinion of his party and save it from immediate schism. It was a necessary element in this plan that those of his colleagues who would countenance no departure, however qualified or contingent, from strict Cobdenism, must be jettisoned, and this he proceeded by a curious and ruthless manoeuvre to do.

On the 9th September Mr. Chamberlain had brought the situation to a head by sending his chief a letter of resignation, which the latter on the 16th accepted. In the letter of the 9th the writer explained that his object in resigning was to popularise Colonial preference and food taxes, which he admitted to be at the moment too much disliked to be adopted by the Government as immediate practical objectives. This mission he could best achieve from the outside; but meanwhile he urged the Prime Minister to embrace what had found much more favour with the public, namely, the domestic and purely protectionist branch of his proposals, even if this involved the reconstitution of the Government (or in plain language the extrusion from it of the uncompromising Free Traders). Between the 10th September, when this letter was received, and the 16th, when it was acknowledged by Mr. Balfour, was held the crucial



“ON HIS NERVES”  
(1903)

THE MAN AND HIS SHADOW

Wherever Mr. Chamberlain goes he always finds the shadow of Mr. Asquith either before him or behind him. He is evidently, to judge from his speech at Preston, getting to feel haunted.  
(From a cartoon in the “Westminster Gazette”)



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Cabinet of the 14th. At this Cabinet Mr. Balfour declared himself in favour of fiscal change of an unspecified nature, and gave the extreme Free Traders—Mr. Ritchie, Lord George Hamilton, and Lord Balfour of Burleigh—what the Duke of Devonshire bluntly called “notice to quit.” No hint was given to these gentlemen (or to the Cabinet as a whole) that the Prime Minister actually had Mr. Chamberlain’s resignation in his pocket, although their conduct might well have been modified by the knowledge that the chief protagonist of food taxes intended to leave the Government.<sup>1</sup> The Duke, indeed, who had made common cause with them, was induced by strong pressure from his chief to suspend his own resignation. But then the Duke was on the 16th shown Mr. Chamberlain’s letter of resignation and Mr. Balfour’s reply accepting it; though the latter declined his natural request to convey their tenor to his Free Trade colleagues.<sup>2</sup> To a man of the Duke’s sensitive scruple such a situation could not long be tolerable: and after enduring for a fortnight the pangs of an uneasy conscience, he was not sorry to find in Mr. Balfour’s speech at Sheffield on the 1st October compelling grounds for following them into retirement. In this speech the Prime Minister proclaimed in vague but vehement terms his abandonment of the principle that Customs duties should be imposed for revenue only. Meanwhile, having shed both his Free Trade colleagues and Mr. Chamberlain, he filled the vacancies with avowed protectionists like Mr. Lyttelton and Mr. Austen Chamberlain. From that time on for over two years Mr. Chamberlain “educated the electors” in the country while Mr. Balfour, in the House of Commons, exhausted the whole technique of procrastination and non-committal pending the result of his late colleague’s missionary efforts.

## II

These events afforded Asquith an ideal opportunity for the effective exercise of his most characteristic gifts. Within a short time of Chamberlain’s *démarche* in May the whole Liberal pack was in full cry after him. But then, as later, Asquith was the quickest off the mark and throughout the closest—often in a geographical sense—to his heels. From the day when as a boy of fifteen at the City of London School he had won a prize awarded for the best paper on Part I of Mill’s *Political Economy*, he had familiarised

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Balfour’s apologia for withholding the letter will be found in Vol. II of the *Life of the Duke of Devonshire*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

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himself with the whole field of this particular controversy. In his twenties he had lectured on it for the University Extension movement: in his thirties he had written on it in the *Spectator* and the *Economist*. He knew the history of the struggle for Free Trade backwards. His extraordinary gift of lucidity, which, as has been well said, drove a Roman road through any subject, was especially opportune here. By its help he was able to carry a popular audience with him through tracts of hard ratiocination and austere relevance, which, with different handling, would have left them footsore and fogged. To clarity of statement he added another gift, not less serviceable. Morley, in a passage in which he pays tribute to Rosebery's minute knowledge of eighteenth century history, adds, "and he has it all ready." This was true of Asquith in relation to any subject of which he had knowledge at all. His knowledge was not, as with so many, locked away at the back of the mind, available indeed in the long run, but after some fumbling with the key. It was producible on the instant, in black and white, without blur, indecision, or inaccuracy.

Of this quality one or two illustrations may usefully here be given. Chamberlain asserted in one of his speeches that while the Corn Laws were repealed in 1846, the price of wheat continued for the next ten years actually higher, on the average, than in the period immediately preceding repeal. Asquith immediately pointed out (what he alleged, perhaps sanguinely, every schoolboy knew) that repeal, while passed in 1846, did not take legal effect till 1849; that as regards the early 'fifties the Crimean War raised prices by cutting off the Russian (which was then the main) source of supply, and that during the years 1849-1853 when neither of these causes was operating, the price of wheat fell sharply. When the efficacy of domestic tariffs for purposes of negotiation and retaliation was dwelt on, he knew and could cite, without recourse to books, the attempts which Peel and Gladstone had made in the early 'forties to employ them for this purpose, and against what countries, and with what invariably negative results. When Mr. Chamberlain asserted that the protagonists of Free Trade had made their advocacy of it contingent on other countries following suit, he was able at once to lay his hands on the passages in which Peel and Bright had declared the exact contrary. So again, when Chamberlain, in his attempt to show that our export trade had been "stagnant" for decades, selected the year 1872 as the basis of comparison, Asquith knew, without research, that this was a year of grossly inflated prices (owing to speculation which followed the

Franco-Prussian War) and therefore a wholly misleading year for the purpose in hand.

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Many public men doubtless knew, or had at some time known, all these things. Given time and opportunity they could exhume them from books of reference or from the vaults of recollection. Asquith alone could produce them infallibly, effortlessly and on the instant, with deadly results to any sophism or inaccuracy into which his opponents were betrayed. He had indeed perforce to lean somewhat heavily on this accomplishment during his campaign. For him exhaustive research, elaborate preparation were out of the question. A large practice at the Bar absorbed the hours from 10 to 4 p.m. during the sittings of the Courts. Attendance at the House and preparation of the next day's briefs made heavy drafts on the residue. Meanwhile the series of speeches in which he pursued his joust with Chamberlain were delivered mainly from provincial platforms in time stolen from these exacting engagements in London. Such conditions compel a large measure of improvisation. It is the more surprising that his Free Trade addresses exhibit an order, an architecture, a literary finish which suggests the consumption of midnight oil and enables them still to be read with enjoyment. His audiences found in them no claptrap, no appeals to sentiment : but brute reason, tempered by grace of language and salted with humour has an attraction of its own. Campbell-Bannerman's recognition of their value was typically generous. "Wonderful speeches," he wrote in November 1903. "How can these fellows ever have gone wrong?" and endorsed the general verdict that no one had done so much to defeat Chamberlain as Asquith.

### III

The fiscal battle went through two phases. In the first, which extended from May to mid-September 1903, Chamberlain was still a member of the Government and submitted to some at least of the restraints of office. After making his new profession of faith in two or three tentative speeches, marked by a crescendo of confidence and definition, he reluctantly embraced the vows of silence for the time being wrung by Mr. Balfour from his colleagues. In the second phase which stretched from October 1903 on, silence along with the other trammels of party discipline was thrown to the winds, and he plunged unleashed into his flaming propaganda. During the autumn he spoke at Glasgow, Greenock, Newcastle, Tynemouth, and Liverpool. His first revolutionary pronouncement had left

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Liberals a little breathless. A few, attracted by the vision of a self-sustaining Empire, seemed to hesitate. Asquith, like Campbell-Bannerman, joined issue early and decisively, and the whole party followed their lead. He replied at Doncaster, within a week, and in the most uncompromising fashion, to Mr. Chamberlain's Birmingham speech of 15th May: and followed this up by intervening in one of the Commons debates of May and June. In one of these debates he called attention to the extraordinary and open schism which had developed within the Government.

"Here we have two Ministers of the Crown, seated upon the Treasury Bench, separated the one from the other only by the intervention of the Prime Minister himself. One of them, the Colonial Secretary, is the Minister who is constitutionally responsible for the management of the relations between this country and the outlying parts of the Empire; the other, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, is the Minister responsible for the fiscal arrangements of the United Kingdom and a great part of the Empire. These two Ministers are propounding fundamentally and irreconcilably divergent views in a matter which affects more vitally than any other matter in the whole range of politics the unity of the Empire, and the fiscal arrangements and prosperity of the country."

(House of Commons, 10th June, 1903.)

The second phase of the campaign was opened by Chamberlain, now a chartered free lance, at Glasgow, on the 6th October, and at Greenock the day after. To these utterances Asquith replied at Cinderford on the 8th. This speech, which with three others delivered within a month of it contains the pith and marrow of the argument which he was to ingeminate on a hundred platforms within the next year or two, is perhaps worth quoting. He opened with a picture, satirical but hardly overdrawn, of the Prime Minister's recent proceedings and the "lead" which he had given his party:

"What has been and what is the attitude of His Majesty's responsible Government, and, in particular, of the first Minister of the Crown? Mr. Balfour declared, in the first instance, that he personally had an open mind; further, as he told us last week, I think at Sheffield, that he would have been content to see this matter—a matter which, in the opinion of his most distinguished colleague, was one of life and death to the kingdom and Empire—he would have been content to see it left an open question amongst the members of his own Government and his own party. An open mind needs to be informed. Accordingly a so-called inquiry was set on foot. Under that pretext, during what remained of the Parliamentary Session, discussion in the House of Commons was, with more or less success, kept at bay, the Government declaring that until the inquiry was over there was no policy, which, as a Government, they could collectively be called upon either to define or to defend. The



A FAMILY GROUP AT GLEN. 1904

Herbert

Violet

Arthur

Margot

Elizabeth

Cyril





prorogation took place, and, as we now know, early in August the Prime Minister composed and circulated amongst his colleagues an academic treatise on fiscal retaliation. 1902-1905 Age 49-53

It was, if I may say so with respect, a most elegant and ingenious disquisition ; but, for all it had to do with the proposals of Mr. Chamberlain, it might just as well have been written and published in Mars. It contained, it is true, a few perfunctory and not altogether accurate statements as to the conditions of British trade, but for the most part it was concerned with the operation of an imaginary code of an imaginary Cobden upon an imaginary island in an imaginary world. Another month passed, and at the end of that we were given to understand, first by correspondence which took place between Mr. Balfour and Mr. Chamberlain, and then by the speech of the former at Sheffield, that under some undefined influence the open mind of the Prime Minister had closed. His fluid opinions had crystallised into convictions, and, in principle, he had become a convert to Mr. Chamberlain's fiscal proposals.

It seems that there is a wide gulf between a convert in principle and a fellow-worker in the mission-field. 'I do not think,' said Mr. Balfour, at Sheffield, 'that public opinion in this country is ripe for the taxation of food.' It is not as though he, the leader, as he reminded us, of a great party, giving a lead to that party upon a critical occasion—it is not as though he professes to agree with public opinion. On the contrary, he does not disguise his view that public opinion upon this topic is the slave and the dupe of ingrained political prejudice and perverted historical analogies ; but, bad as he thinks it, and wrong as he thinks it, he is not going to engage his party to combat and to convert it. No ; for himself and his colleagues he has abandoned the open mind, but the open field he leaves to Mr. Chamberlain. He is asked to give a lead, and what is the lead that he gives ? In effect, what he says to his followers is this : For the moment we will all combine to talk generalities about retaliation or freedom of negotiation, which may mean anything or which may mean nothing ; in that way the unity of our party will be secured ; but none the less, our lamented colleague, Mr. Chamberlain—who, as all the world can see, has parted from me and I from him in a glow of mutual appreciation and regret—our lamented colleague will continue to conduct, ostensibly from outside, his propaganda for the taxation of bread and meat. In the meantime, I, the Prime Minister, having shed my Free Trade colleagues, will contemplate his operations from afar, with undisguised, though for the moment inactive, sympathy, waiting with my sickle ready, for the ripening of the harvest."

He dealt next with tariffs as a weapon of negotiation or reprisal. The "freedom of negotiation" which it was alleged they would confer, Parliament already possessed and had actually exercised in that very session in dealing with sugar bounties. As to retaliation, it had proved in practice completely ineffective as a means of procuring tariff reductions elsewhere, as he proceeded to show by chapter and verse in connection with Peel and Gladstone's experience in the 'forties. After disposing of two common fallacies by

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quoting Peel's dictum: "I do not care whether foreign countries remove their tariffs or not. It is the duty and the interest of this country to fight tariffs by free imports," and by pointing out that contemporary tariffs, though higher than those of yesterday, were mildness itself compared with those which existed when Free Trade was adopted, he came to grips with the concrete proposals in Mr. Chamberlain's Glasgow speech. These, it will be remembered, included duties of 2s. a quarter on foreign wheat, 5 per cent on meat and dairy produce, and 10 per cent on foreign manufactures, raw materials being exempt. Mr. Chamberlain had repeated that the Empire would disintegrate without preferences on food, and that British trade would collapse without a tariff on manufactures. He had added that our trade had been practically stagnant for the last thirty years. This last allegation, Asquith pointed out, was based wholly on the figures of exports, and exports of goods. To argue from such premises to such conclusions, he pointed out, involved four distinct fallacies:

"In the first place, it entirely ignores the home trade, which is a much more important factor than the foreign trade; in the second place, it makes exports alone the criterion of the volume of our trade; in the third place, it places among exports exported goods alone, and takes no notice of the services that we render to other countries; finally, even taking exported goods as the criterion, a year is deliberately selected which is no fair test of the matter at all."

Proceeding to criticise the Imperial side of the programme, the speaker pointed out that the existing Canadian preference was granted with an express declaration that no return was asked for, that it did not permit British imports into Canada to compete on level terms with Canadian products, and that it had not had the effect of increasing British trade with Canada as rapidly as foreign countries, unaided by a preference, had increased theirs. Preference such as was possible within the 2s. duty on wheat proposed by Chamberlain would be quite inadequate to divert the whole wheat supplies of the United Kingdom into the then undeveloped fields of Canada. Before they could turn round it would be 10 per cent and then 20 per cent. But the proposed exemption of raw materials was in itself enough to wreck the whole scheme from the imperial standpoint, since many of our Colonies—e.g. South Africa at that time—exported nothing else, and would therefore be wholly excluded from benefit. As to Colonies whose producers supplied both raw materials and food, how defend a system which favoured the one at the expense of the other? Canada and Australia both export

wheat. But how would the Canadian lumberman or the Australian producer of wool view a preference given to their wheat farming compatriots but denied to themselves? Such a proposal was lopsided, partial, and invidious, and so far from consolidating the Imperial structure, would drive a wedge of ill feeling between its component parts and even between different classes of producers within the same part. What, in any case, is a raw material? This was a question of crucial importance in connection with the domestic aspect of the question and the 10 per cent duty on imported manufactures,<sup>1</sup> to which he now turned. Chamberlain had proposed to obtain not less than £9,000,000 revenue from this duty. No such yield could possibly be realised unless such commodities as paper, leather, cement, iron ore, timber, and the like were treated as subject to the duty. But these were in all but name the raw materials of British industries which worked them up into finished, or more nearly finished products. As such they were as much entitled to the exemption, and for the same reason, as raw materials in the full sense.

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In subsequent speeches during the next month at Newcastle, Paisley, and Worcester, Asquith pushed these arguments home and asked a number of pointed questions to which he never received direct or satisfactory replies. It was claimed by Chamberlain that the foreign importer and not the British consumer would pay the duties. If he did, why should he not be made to pay on raw materials as well as on food and manufactures? But would the foreign importer pay the duties? Why, unless the consumer was to bear the duty, did Chamberlain, within the category of food-stuffs, pointedly exempt bacon as being a popular food with the poorest of the population? If, on the other hand, the claim that the "foreigner" pays is surrendered, and the ultimate burden of the duties is admitted to fall on consumers, why did their interests not require the exemption of wheat and meat along with bacon, and indeed of food in general, as much as of raw materials? On any possible view of the incidence of the duties, the distinction between the imports subject to the duty and those exempt from it was an affront to logic. Food, incidentally, he pointed out, is in a direct sense a raw material of important domestic industries, and indirectly (as entering into the cost of labour) of all: a fact which Chamberlain himself had then not only admitted but insisted on by declaring

<sup>1</sup> The average rate was to be 10 per cent, but the rate for particular classes of articles was to be fixed "scientifically" by a Tariff Commission. There is nothing new under the sun.

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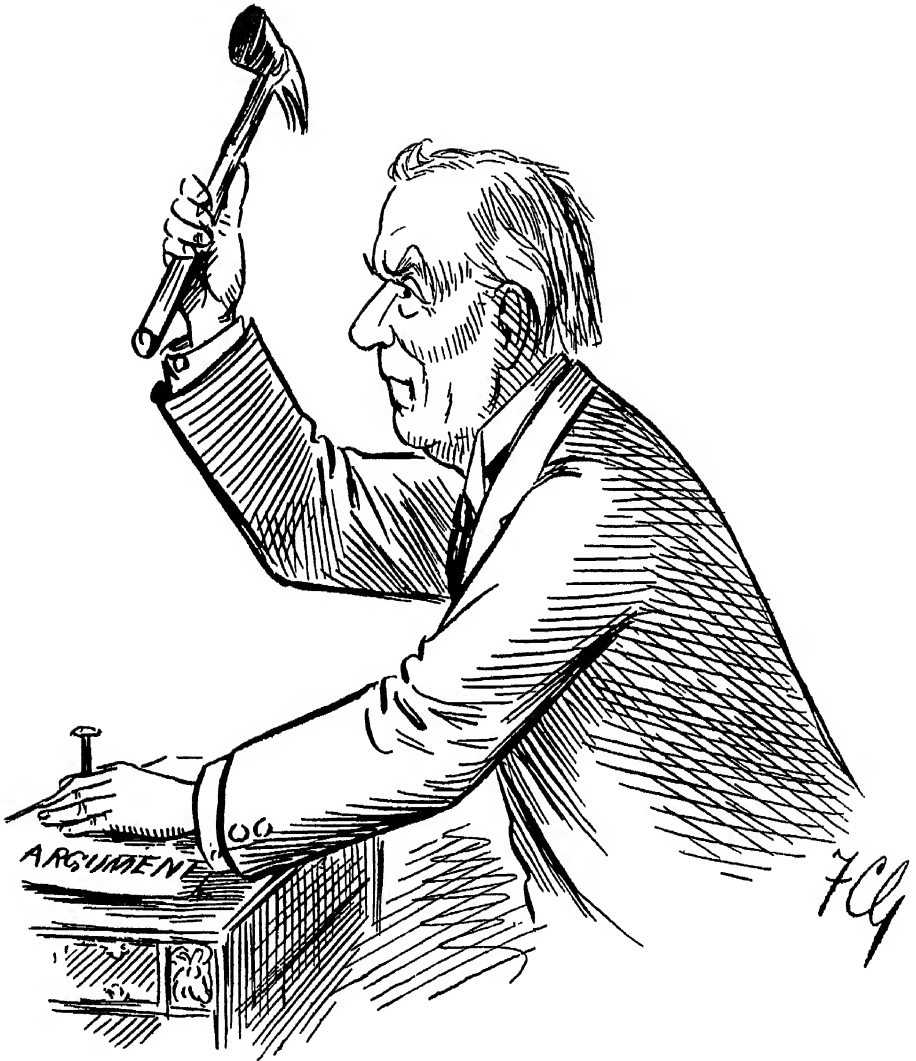
that if the price of food were raised "wages would certainly be raised in greater proportion."<sup>1</sup> Again the home farmer was promised that the 2s. a quarter duty on imported wheat would benefit him. But would it? As he said a year later:

"As, according to Mr. Chamberlain, the price of corn would not be raised, the farmer would, first, not get any more for a quarter of wheat than he got before; secondly, he would have to pay more for his machinery; and, thirdly, as *colonial wheat* and other farm products were to *come in free*, and as in course of time Mr. Chamberlain hoped colonial would take the place of foreign produce, the farmer would not be any happier for being undersold by the Canadian than by the American. In any case the rise of price from a duty of 2s. a quarter would not be from the point of view of the farmer so great as to put him in an appreciably better position as regards his foreign rival; and the result would be that the nation, having conceded the principle that the farmer was entitled to this modest form of Protection, would have to raise the duty next to 5s. and then to 10s., until we had a good, swingeing, old-fashioned protective duty with a corresponding increase in all the necessaries of life. Mr. Chamberlain had sneered at them for 'prescribing a pill as a remedy against an earthquake,' but in the whole history of political pharmacy, orthodox and otherwise, it was doubtful whether a more minute globule than this 2s. duty had ever been offered as a cure for an advanced and well-nigh desperate disease." (Speech at Ladybank, 8th October, 1904.)

And if the "globule" became a substantial draught sufficient to purge the country of foreign produce, what became of the revenue from the duty which (along with the yield of the duty from manufactures) had been sanguinely earmarked to the relief of the sugar and tea duties and the provision of old age pensions?

Similar questions were posed by Asquith with regard to the 10 per cent duty on manufactures. A revenue of possibly fifteen, but not less than nine, millions had been promised from this source. Chamberlain could never be got to say plainly whether the duty was to be levied on goods partly manufactured which are sent to this country to be worked up into finished or more finished articles. But in principle and in logic the exemption given to raw materials must be shared by these things. For as Asquith repeatedly asked, "How is a raw material to be defined? I know of one definition and one only, for this purpose. It is a commodity which comes here in order that British capital and British labour may be expended on it." Of the £149,000,000 of so-called imported manufactures in 1902, the Board of Trade itself only treated £100,000,000 as manufactures in the strict sense: the rest were semi-manufactured.

<sup>1</sup> *Letter to a Working Man*, June 1903.



THE "HAMMER"

Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman, in Parliamentary Emergencies, would "Send for the Hammer"  
(From a cartoon in the "Westminster Gazette")



But if, as logic required, the semi-manufactured residue was treated as exempt, Mr. Chamberlain could only secure his promised £9,000,000 revenue if practically the whole of the fully manufactured goods continued to come in and paid the duty, in which event clearly the home manufacturer would get no protection at all. The tendency to claim revenue on goods on the assumption that they were admitted and protection against them on the assumption that they were excluded was, as Asquith said, inveterate on the part of the Protectionists of 1903–1905. In a debate in the early part of 1904, he pointed out that no opposing speaker had avoided the trap, and went on to formulate a fiscal shorter catechism which is not yet perhaps wholly out of date :

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“While I have listened to this debate I have thought that there was a great deal of force in the suggestion put forward somewhere that we should put together as an enduring monument of this debate a short manual of Protection for beginners, the first principles of which should be taken from the speeches of the late Colonial Secretary,<sup>1</sup> and the illustrations from the speeches of the Secretary to the Board of Trade.<sup>2</sup> In odd moments I have endeavoured to construct for myself one or two pages of this imaginary manual, and with the permission of the House I will give a few extracts. The first question is, ‘What is Free Trade?’ And the answer is, ‘A shibboleth.’ ‘By whom was it invented?’ ‘By one Adam Smith, a professor who had probably never set foot in a factory in his life. A later writer, Carlyle, is a much safer guide.’ ‘How, then, did it get to be adopted as part of the policy of this country?’ ‘Through the machinations of a middle-class conspiracy headed by one Cobden, whose main object was to lower the wages of labour.’ ‘How has the superstition managed to survive?’ ‘Because there are people simple enough and short-sighted enough to imagine that in foreign trade it is well to receive more than you give.’ ‘Can you give a practical illustration of this?’ ‘Since the year 1860 the imports into the United Kingdom have exceeded the exports, according to the Board of Trade returns, by no less than 4,000 million sterling.’ ‘What does that mean? Translate it into terms of wages and employment.’ ‘Roughly speaking, the loss in wages to British workmen is 2,000 million sterling.’ ‘How then have we escaped ruin?’ ‘By the mercy of Providence.’ ‘And how are we to set ourselves right?’ ‘By waiting for the report of the Tariff Commission.’ I ask, is that a caricature of the arguments that have been used?”

(House of Commons, 15th Feb., 1904.)

In this conflict Free Traders were lucky as well as skilful. In the first place, they were spared some of the complications with which the question has since been beset. At the time of Chamberlain’s campaign, this country was broadly speaking paying by current exports of goods and services for the whole of its imports, without

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Chamberlain.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Bonar Law.



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drawing for the purpose materially on its income from foreign investments, most or all of which was annually reinvested abroad. No case therefore for import restrictions could be founded on the existence in any sense of an adverse balance on the country's international trading account. There was of course an excess of goods imported over goods exported, but under the conditions then ruling it was quite easy to explode the protectionist contention that this difference was met by borrowing or living on the nation's capital. Nor was the debate then distracted by currency depreciation which has imparted so puzzling a twist to it in recent times. The arena was in fact clear for a clean fight on the classic fiscal issue. Secondly, Protectionist logic was in 1903-1905 vitiated fatally and from the start by a reluctance—then more extreme than it has since become—to tax raw materials. Thirdly, Mr. Chamberlain's proposals were unfolded at a time of immense and rising prosperity, when every prediction of impending commercial ruin was promptly belied by the Board of Trade returns. Lastly, he and his friends were betrayed by haste or ignorance into obvious mistakes. Much of their argument was an implied denial of the part which exports play in paying for imports, and of the existence and significance of the invisible items in foreign trade, and was so far opposed to the practically unanimous teaching of contemporary economists. The singular distinction, moreover, which Chamberlain himself drew between "facts" and "figures" lent itself to some effective satire, and on occasion he made blunders of fact which could be neither retrieved nor extenuated. Of this order was his assertion that foreign countries were not "handicapped" in their competition with us by Factories Acts and similar social legislation. Asquith, an ex-Home Secretary *inter alia*, was quick to point out that the great majority of Continental nations had factory legislation—in many cases copied from our own—and that Germany, which Chamberlain had singled out as our most formidable rival, was "handicapped" in addition by a system of social insurance, which, incidentally, we have since copied from her. Whether Mr. Chamberlain's persistent refusal to answer this and similar criticisms was good tactics is an open question. His practice at any rate was to ignore them and to dismiss Asquith contemptuously as a lawyer and no business man; to which Asquith retorted somewhat tartly that he would gladly defer to business men who understood and applied the rules of arithmetic and quoted against him a damning utterance of his Free Trade kinsman, Mr. Arthur Chamberlain.

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Side by side with the tournament of the hustings proceeded an extraordinary conflict in the House of Commons. The Prime Minister's aim was simple and hardly disguised. It was to hold together a party purged of its intransigent Cobdenites by a policy of suspense and non-committal: prepared, if Chamberlain's hot-gossiping fell flat, to disown him; free, nevertheless, if it "caught on" to embrace the Birmingham creed in its entirety and appropriate its political fruits to followers whose opposition would, he judged, be disarmed by its success. The adoption of such an aim, and the tactics necessary to achieve it, both presented a broad target for attack. Politicians are not in office to nurse unsettled convictions, and the head of a Government at any rate may fairly be required, when confronted with an imperial question of supreme importance, and as it was represented, of supreme urgency, to form a settled conviction and to act on it with decision. The office of a leader is to lead, and to many of his own followers a policy of marking time, and waiting to see which way the "cat would jump" seemed an abdication of that office. The maintenance of such an attitude moreover compelled the Prime Minister to profess sympathy with the fiscal views of Mr. Chamberlain on the one hand and of Free Traders like Lord Hugh Cecil on the other, and to represent as a mere difference of emphasis the gulf which yawned between them. But whatever view was entertained about the expediency of Mr. Balfour's tactics, the dexterity with which he trod his chosen tight rope was beyond dispute and beyond admiration. Missile after missile flung at him as he walked his perilous path was gracefully dodged. Resolution after deadly resolution strove to drive a wedge between the glaringly dissident groups of his combination, yet by some miracle of evasion he managed to turn its edge. His pursuers always seemed to lack the last turn of speed needed to corner him. Indignity he suffered and humiliation, but never parliamentary shipwreck, though on more than one occasion he escaped this by inches. Nor were formal desertions numerous. A few Free Trade Unionist back benchers like Mr. Winston Churchill crossed the floor of the House. The bulk of them, more enamoured, when it came to the point, of their party than of free imports, built from straws a bridge between their present convictions and their political allegiance. Electoral "arrangements" were mooted between them and the Opposition, but in the end came to nothing.

And so the game, whose end had been confidently predicted as a matter of months, went on for two and a half years. In October

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applications of Nonconformists to receive fair consideration from a body with a permanent clerical majority? Meanwhile, the demands of secondary education—the only original pretext for legislative interference—were entirely lost sight of. It was hardly to be wondered at that this educational revolution (introduced incidentally on the purely “Khaki” mandate of 1900 and rammed through Parliament under the closure) convulsed the world of Nonconformity, brought into the field Dr. Clifford and his conscientious objectors, and ranged against the Government thousands who had abandoned their traditional political allegiance to vote for it in 1900. It did indeed more. It disgusted many Liberal Unionists in Parliament, including Mr. Chamberlain, who, confining himself in public to the statement that the matter was a highly complex one, had left in dudgeon for South Africa: while on the other hand it harmonised the voice of the Opposition and associated on a common platform some of its members who had seemed estranged beyond even the outward show of comradeship.

Asquith's view of the Bill can be gathered from one or two of his speeches at this time. Speaking at the Alexandra Palace (Nov. 1902) in company with Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman, he held the following language:

“I don't know the secret history of this Bill—what was its pedigree, who are its real parents, where it first saw the light, who held it up to the font—I do not know any of these arcana of the Legislative Chamber. But this I do know, and this I venture to say to you, and to all fair-minded men whom my voice can reach, that if the object of the framers of this Bill had been to answer this question, ‘At how low a price, by how small a surrender of clerical and sectarian domination can the Church of England secure for all time to come for her schools a blank cheque upon the rates of England and Wales?’ this Bill is the simplest and fullest answer to that inquiry.”

On the 19th of the same month, at the St. James' Hall, he said:

“To sum the matter up, they had here a Bill which absolutely upset and revolutionised their existing system of education. It abolished the School Boards and established in place of them a non-representative authority. It gave to the denominational schools a complete public endowment, which was nothing more nor less than a fresh endowment to the Church of England. The Bill had never been submitted even in outline to the country, and there was strong reason to believe that the great majority of the electors disapproved of it. That a measure like that should pass through the House of Commons under the compulsion of the closure, and through the House of Lords in docile and tacit subservience to the Government of the day, was an outrage on the constitutional traditions of the country.”



*Beresford*

H. H. A.  
(About 1904)



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Having alienated the Nonconformists by the Education Act 1902, the Government in 1904 inflamed the temperance reformers against them by a Licensing Act which provided that a licence once granted could only be withdrawn, in the absence of misconduct or unsuitability of premises, on payment of compensation. This, argued the Opposition, converted it into a freehold and conferred an enormous bonus on the trade in the form of increased values. While this at least conciliated the brewers, the introduction of Chinese Labour into South Africa conciliated practically no one. The spread of a higher civilisation in that country had seemed to those who supported the Boer War a necessary sequel and justification, and to those who opposed it an indispensable measure of atonement. To both groups the importation of a horde of Chinese under semi-servile conditions of employment appeared as a negation not only of this ideal, but of civilisation itself. Convoyed to the Rand in droves without their wives or families, immured in compounds whence they were not allowed to issue without permits (and then only for 48 hours), refused the right of holding mineral rights or any fixed property, obliged to work 60 hours a week for 2s. a day, subjected to an extraordinary code of offences and penalties, and destined after four years of this to be exported to the place from which they came, they constituted the nearest approach to human chattels—the *ἐμψυχόν τι κτῆμα* of Aristotle—to be found in the British Empire. Liberals were gravely censured for speaking of Chinese “slavery,” but the distinction between these conditions and formal servitude seemed to most of them of the flimsiest. In defence of the scheme the most that could be said (and Mr. Lyttelton, the Minister responsible for it, kept repeating it) was that since the remuneration of the immigrants exceeded what most of them could earn in their own country it would be a hardship to them to be debarred from bettering their financial condition : and that conditions of labour of comparable severity had been approved by ordinances of the British Crown in the past. To Liberals all this seemed beside the point. Intolerable conditions of labour within the Empire were none the less intolerable because their victims would be even worse off in Cathay ; and if, which they denied, conditions materially resembling them had been countenanced by British Governments in the past, so much the worse for the ordinances and Governments in question. In Asquith’s words :

“ When the right hon. gentleman tells us, as he did just now, that he is only following in our footsteps, that those who sit on this bench, or previous Ministers, are responsible for the initiation of slavery, I tell him

1902-1905 there is one vital and fundamental difference between every Ordinance  
Age 49-53 that exists, I do not care where, throughout the length and breadth of the British Empire and the Ordinance now under consideration, and that difference is this—in all the existing Ordinances such restrictions as there are—they may be too numerous, or too severe, I do not know—but such restrictions as there are are devised and enforced entirely for the purpose of seeing that the labourer executes his contract with his employer. Yes, but what is the reason for the additional restrictions which are put into this Ordinance? It is not to secure the performance by the labourer of his contract that his employer prevents the labourer from getting into free contact or communication with the community; it is to keep him in a situation in which you have never ventured, and never will venture, to keep any subject of the King, however humble he may be, or from whatever quarter of the Empire he may come—a situation from which he cannot aspire to rise, however frugal, industrious, thrifty, or public-spirited he may be, in which he can never aspire to be a living member of the community.” (House of Commons, 21st March, 1904.)

As time slipped by the Liberal harvest ripened. But no one foresaw the bumper crop of 1906.

## CHAPTER XIV

### BACK IN OFFICE

Lord Rosebery's Bodmin speech—Embarrassment for the Liberal League—Asquith's action—Formation of the Liberal Government—Sir Edward Grey and Campbell-Bannerman—Asquith's attitude—The General Election—The Liberal triumph—Chinese labour; Asquith's opinion—The Transvaal Constitution—The Algeiras crisis—Asquith's first Budget—The Trade Disputes Bill—The lawyers' view—Campbell-Bannerman's intervention—Asquith's condition—Beginning of the struggle with the House of Lords—"Ploughing the sands" and "filling up the cup."  
J. A. S.

ON 25th November Lord Rosebery made a speech at Bodmin which ended his co-operation with the Liberal Party and brought considerable embarrassment to his friends of the Liberal League. Referring to the speech at Stirling two days earlier in which Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman had defined the Liberal policy on Home Rule in strict conformity with the lines laid down by the Shadow Cabinet—the step by step policy as it was then called—Lord Rosebery strongly objected to what he termed the "raising of the banner of Home Rule" at this moment, and said emphatically and explicitly and once for all "that he could not serve under that banner."

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The speech made an immense sensation. It caused anger and dismay among Liberals who saw the old schisms revived at a moment when the party seemed at length to be united and within reach of the promised land. It raised the drooping spirits of the Unionist Party and offered Mr. Balfour what seemed to be a favourable moment for the long deferred plunge of resigning and shifting the attack from himself to his opponents. To Asquith as also to Mr. Haldane and Sir Edward Grey—all of them Vice-Presidents of the Liberal League of which Lord Rosebery was President—it came as a complete surprise, and Asquith certainly felt under no obligation to follow where it seemed to lead. On the contrary, the passage in Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's speech which Lord Rosebery had challenged exactly expressed the policy agreed upon by the Liberal leaders, to which he himself was a party, and he was amazed



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that Lord Rosebery should have attacked it without consulting his friends or waiting to know the facts. Lord Rosebery on the other hand was aggrieved that the Vice-Presidents of the League had not kept their President informed of their dealings with Campbell-Bannerman, and he spoke of the letter in which Sir Edward Grey informed him of the facts on the day after the Bodmin speech as "the greatest blow he had ever received in his political life."

The truth was that the Liberal League had played a much smaller part in the thoughts of the Vice-Presidents than in those of the President during the preceding two years in which all the sections had been working together in the common cause. They were members of the Shadow Cabinet in confidential relations with the accredited leader of the party, and Lord Rosebery was, by his own choice, in a position of detachment. It had not occurred to them that he would take a step so irretrievable in its consequences to himself and so threatening to Liberal unity without seeking their advice; and they could not admit that he had a claim to be informed about the proceedings of a body in which he had declined to participate. To those who saw him in these days Asquith spoke freely and forcibly about the mischief of the Bodmin speech, and much as he regretted the severance from an old friend, he felt it impossible to take Lord Rosebery into his confidence during the following days in which the Campbell-Bannerman Government was being formed. But when the Government was complete he wrote him a friendly letter and received a friendly if somewhat pained reply:

*Lord Rosebery to Asquith.*

DURDANS,  
EPSOM.

*Dec. 28, 1905.*

*Secret.*

I am grateful for your letter. I am touched by its spirit, and I heartily reciprocate its expressions. As to yourself, I have never departed for a moment from what I said of you in my farewell speech at Edinburgh in 1896, and so I am confident it will be to the end.

Intercourse between us has been too rare, both for my own pleasure as a friend, and also for the political objects in which we were publicly united. I knew you were overwhelmingly busy, and did not like to trouble you. Moreover there was a certain shyness on my part, and reluctance to appear to interfere too much in a political future in which I had renounced my official share. You, I think, have much the same shyness, and even in conversation we waited for the other to begin.

However this may be, this silence has been harmful on certainly one occasion.

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I do not mean that there was no communication with me as to taking office, and that I only knew of the accession of my friends from the newspapers. As I had founded and worked at the League entirely to promote their power and usefulness, it would have been a satisfaction to know from themselves, even without being consulted, what was going on. No one would believe at this moment that I know nothing of what passed in that critical week, and, as I told Edward Grey the other day, no longer wish to know. I do not allude to this, because I think and thought that all was for the best, that communications will be compromising, and that a resolution on so crucial a question should be taken on the sole responsibility of those involved. You and the other Vice-Presidents had long known that there was no question of office in my case.

No : the occasion that I do mean was in regard to the Irish policy of the new Prime Minister. Had I known in Cornwall that you had had from him explanations which proved that he shared your published views on Home Rule, I should not have uttered any protest at Bodmin. I regarded, and still regard his language at Stirling as extremely mischievous ; but I should have ignored it (as I wished to do) had I known that the error was one of expression only, and that he had opened himself satisfactorily to you. Even then, had my ignorance only resulted in obloquy on myself, I should not have cared. But it has produced an appearance of schism which I would gladly have averted, which Tories may misuse, and which it is impossible wholly to obliterate.

Had you, on reading my public misgivings at Truro, telegraphed to me " Say nothing about Stirling speech—will explain " I would gladly have been silent. For during two years I have been sweating (there is no other word) for the unity of the Free Trade party.

I quite understand that, in the stress of your profession, and under the pressure of the impending crisis, you never thought of this. I only regret the party consequences, and the embarrassment of my friends.

On reading all this over it leaves in my mouth a taste of reproach. Do not let it invade yours, for I mean nothing less. It is all over and done. I have returned to my books, and am happy with them. I hope when I come to town that I shall often see you and my other friends. And though between you all and me there is the definite barrier of office, with its new claims and loyalties, I trust and believe that it will be as imperceptible as possible. And, in any case, I shall watch your career with an admiration and affection, and a confidence, that have never wavered.

Yours,  
R.

Forgive the intolerable length and illegibility of this letter !

Asquith has related how when Mr. Balfour resigned he was about to start for Egypt with a brief marked ten thousand guineas to represent the ex-Khedival family in a litigation about the Daira Estates in the Egyptian Courts. The voyage had to be abandoned and the brief returned, though, as he says, with much reluctance. There was lively debate in the meantime among Liberal leaders as

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to whether they should accept the task of forming a Government or insist on the Unionist Party remaining in office until after the election. Some thought Mr. Balfour's resignation to be a cunning attempt to place the Opposition at a disadvantage, and strongly advised waiting. Campbell-Bannerman, with whom the decision rested, never had any doubts. He was certain that any appearance of shirking responsibility on tactical grounds would be bad and set about making his plans, as soon as the end was in sight. Asquith saw him in London on 13th November and discussed with him the distribution of places in the Liberal Cabinet. It was arranged at this meeting that he should be Chancellor of the Exchequer, and he strongly urged that Sir Edward Grey should be Foreign Secretary and Mr. Haldane Lord Chancellor. He came away with the impression that he had persuaded Campbell-Bannerman, who had first thought of Lord Elgin, that Grey was the right man for the Foreign Office ; but that the Woolsack was destined for Sir Robert Reid. At this meeting Campbell-Bannerman himself raised the delicate question of his going to the Lords, saying that it had been suggested by "that ingenious person, Richard Burdon Haldane," but let it be known that it would be "with reluctance and even with repugnance"<sup>1</sup> that he would consent to take that step.

What followed has been told in detail in Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's biography,<sup>2</sup> and it is only necessary here to deal with the part that specially concerned Asquith. On the evening of 4th December, the day before the new Prime Minister was to kiss hands, Sir Edward Grey went to his house in Belgrave Square and definitely made the proposal which Campbell-Bannerman had attributed to Haldane that he, the Prime Minister, should go to the Lords and leave the leadership in the Commons to Asquith. It was now much more than a suggestion, for Grey intimated that, if this idea was unacceptable, he would not feel able to join the Government, and it appeared that Haldane also took the same ground.

Campbell-Bannerman did not immediately close the door, but reserved his decision until he could consult his wife who was to return from Scotland on the evening of Wednesday, 6th December. Her voice was at once and emphatically for "no surrender," and on the following morning he informed Asquith that the proposal was declined, but asked him to tell Grey that he might have the Foreign Office, and Haldane the War Office. Before midday Grey had declined this offer, and the deadlock seemed to be complete, but later in the day the influence of old friends was brought to bear,

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. II, Chap. 27.

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and both Grey and Haldane decided to come in. It was put to them that they were not justified, on a seemingly personal point, in dealing the Liberal Party and the Free Trade cause what might be a very damaging blow on the eve of a general election, and this view prevailed.

"I don't want you to risk your personal position more than is absolutely necessary," Grey had written to Asquith on the morning of December 4th, "if you go in eventually without me, I shall be quite happy outside, and I shan't think it in the least wrong. If it comes to the worst, I hold you quite free."<sup>1</sup> Asquith has defined his own attitude in his *Memories and Reflections*.<sup>2</sup> "I was most anxious," he says, "that Grey should come in and go to the Foreign Office, for which his qualifications were unique, and I was equally determined not to press any claim put forward on my behalf, unless it met with Campbell-Bannerman's free and full assent." Undoubtedly at that moment he shared Grey's view that it would be better both for the party and for Campbell-Bannerman himself that he should not undertake the double burden of conducting the Government and leading in the House of Commons, and in his talks with him on the Tuesday and Wednesday of this week he made a strong personal appeal to him to solve the difficulty in the manner suggested.<sup>3</sup> But the thought of applying pressure to obtain an advantage for himself was extremely distasteful to him, and when Campbell-Bannerman definitely declined, he was of opinion that Grey should yield.

Lord Morley has characterised these transactions as "unedifying," and others have spoken of them as a "conspiracy" to compel Campbell-Bannerman to give the most important places in his Government to the Liberal Imperialist group. There was no conspiracy, and so far as the principal offices were concerned, any pressure would have been forcing an open door. No one dreamt of any Chancellor of the Exchequer but Asquith, and in the three days in which it was doubtful whether Sir Edward Grey would come in, Campbell-Bannerman (having by this time appointed Lord Elgin to the Colonial Office) was in great perplexity about an effective substitute for him at the Foreign Office. As for the War Office, which fell to Mr. Haldane, it was considered in those days to be the grave of reputations, and when someone commented on the penitential nature of this refuge for Mr. Haldane, Campbell-Bannerman

<sup>1</sup> See also Lord Grey's *Twenty-five Years*, I, 62. "Asquith had from the first been prepared to take office."

<sup>2</sup> Vol. I, 195.

<sup>3</sup> *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, II, 74.

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was reported to have said, "serve him right." There was no reason whatever to suppose that he would have distributed these offices differently, if this incident had not taken place, and Sir Edward Grey's well-known and perfectly genuine reluctance to accept office makes it specially wide of the mark to suggest that he used coercion to obtain an appointment which was freely at his disposal, if he chose to take it.

Asquith's inner thoughts may be traced in two letters to Haldane, the first when the issue was in doubt, the second when it had been decided :

*Asquith to Mr. Haldane.*

THE ATHEREUM, PAUL MALL, S.W.

*Secret.*

7th December, 1905.

MY DEAR H.

I was empowered this morning to offer the Foreign Office to E. Grey, and an offer of the War Office will soon be on its way to you. The Woolsack being in spite of all my arguments and efforts given elsewhere, I judged from our talk the other day that this would be the place which you would like best, better, e.g., than the Home Office.

But on the other outstanding point—the leadership of the H. of C.—all my endeavours carried on ceaselessly for two days have proved vain. After considerable hesitation and ostensible, probably actual, wavering, C.-B. has, on the advice of his wife, declined to go at once to H. of L.

This, of course, raises a situation of much gravity, and Grey, with whom I have had a long talk, is resolved to refuse office.

I have thought the matter most carefully over during the last 48 hours from every point of view, and I have come to the conclusion (as I told him) that it is my duty to accept.

The conditions are in one respect fundamentally different from those which we, or at any rate I, contemplated when we talked in the autumn. The election is before and not behind us, and a Free Trade majority, still more an independent majority, is not a fact but at most a probability.

I stand in a peculiar position which is not shared by either of you.

If I refuse to go in, one of two consequences follows either (1) the attempt to form a Govt. is given up (which I don't believe in the least would now happen) or (2) a weak Govt. would be formed entirely or almost entirely of one colour.

In either event in my opinion the issue of the election would be put in the utmost peril. It would be said that we were at issue about Home Rule, the Colonies, the Empire, etc. etc., and the defections of the whole of our group would be regarded as conclusive evidence. The *tertius gaudens* at Dalmeny would look on with complacency. I cannot imagine more disastrous conditions under which to fight a Free Trade election.

And the whole responsibility, I repeat, would be mine. I could not say, after the offers made to Grey and you, that our group had been flouted, and the only ground I could take would be that I and not C.-B. must from

the first lead the new H. of Commons. I could not to my own conscience or the world justify such a position. 1905-1906  
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If the election were over, and Free Trade secure, different considerations would arise.

This at any rate is my judgment, and I must act on it, tho' I cannot say what pain it causes me even to appear to sever myself from Grey. He knows this and reciprocates the feeling, and tho' we do not take the same view of our respective duties, I don't quarrel with him nor he with me.

I write this now, because I see no chance of seeing you to-day as I have to go to the country, and that you may have these considerations in your mind when you receive C.-B.'s offer.

I don't want in the least to attempt to influence your judgment, your position and Grey's as regards this particular point, are necessarily different from mine. But I need not say what an enormous and immeasurable difference your co-operation would make to me.

Whatever happens nothing can change our affection and confidence.

Always affectly. yours,

H. H. A.

20 CAVENDISH SQUARE, W.

*Private.*

8th Dec., 1905.

MY DEAR H.

No words of mine can express what I feel : by your action during the last two days you have laid the party and the country and myself (most of all) under an unmeasured debt of gratitude.

I have never spent such a distracting and agonising week. Everything that a man could do I believe I did, to achieve the common purposes, under conditions which none of us could have foreseen.

Grey at the F.O. is, in itself, a great thing ; but the one thing I minded most, and regret most, is the Woolsack. The rest can wait. On a review of the whole affair, I am satisfied that more could not have been accomplished, and there was such a real risk of losing everything.

The W.O. is a great opportunity, and every soldier I have met for the last fortnight has expressed the hope that what now is might be.

The one thing that has dictated my action has been that the election was before, and not behind us.

Ever affectly. yours.

H. H. A.

No one in after days acknowledged more handsomely than Asquith the great qualities which Campbell-Bannerman developed in his leadership of the House of Commons as Prime Minister during the next two years, but in December 1905, Asquith's and Grey's doubts were by no means without justification, nor were they confined to one section of the party. As leader in Opposition, he had scarcely proved a match for the quickness and subtlety of Mr. Balfour ; and owing to his wife's illness he had been compelled to absent himself on some occasions when prompt decisions were needed from the front bench. There was, moreover, the very serious doubt

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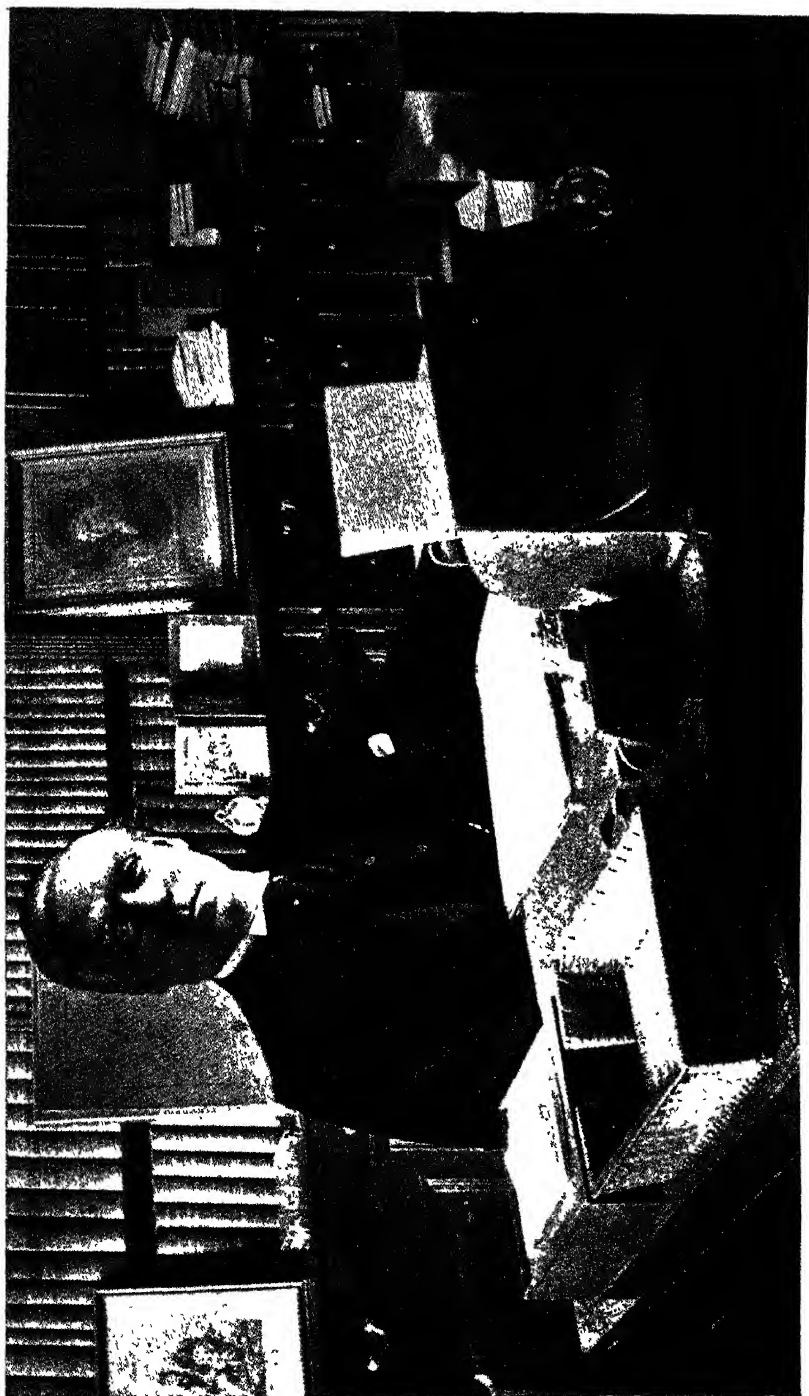
—only too well justified in the sequel—whether his health would stand the double strain of conducting the Government and leading the House. In subsequent years the Conservative as well as the Liberal Party has given its sanction to the doctrine that the Prime Minister must be in the House of Commons, but Asquith was always doubtful on this point, and experience both during and after the War goes far to suggest that the Prime Minister can only undertake the duty of leading the House of Commons if he is permitted to absent himself from a large part of its proceedings.

It was characteristic of Asquith and of the relations of party leaders at this time that he was staying at Hatfield as the guest of Lord Salisbury during the two most critical days in the formation of the Liberal Cabinet. Having said all that he had to say to Campbell-Bannerman, he reached Hatfield in time for dinner, and after dinner, as his wife records in her Diary, “threw himself into the social atmosphere of a fancy ball with his usual simplicity and unself-centredness.”<sup>1</sup>

## II

December was spent in getting into Office, picking up the threads and holding preliminary Cabinets ; and then, after a short Christmas interval, came the plunge into the General Election which was spread out over the greater part of January, and ended, according to the practice of those days, in the long-drawn-out battle of the pollings. During the next fortnight Asquith spoke at Sheffield, Huddersfield, Stockton, Perth, Lensham, Oakham, Henley, and left his own constituency of East Fife till the last few days. It was thought safe—a forecast well justified by his subsequent majority—and his constituents understood that he was wanted elsewhere. His dominant theme was Free Trade with glances forward at the social measures promised for the new Parliament, accompanied by warnings, which became a Chancellor of the Exchequer, that the redemption of all electioneering promises would depend on sound and frugal finance. On Ireland, while professing the Home Rule faith, he kept strictly to the officially agreed line, which was that on this occasion no mandate was being sought for a full measure of Home Rule and no such measure would be proposed without a fresh reference to the electors. The electioneers of these times never forgot that the faults and blunders of their opponents—if these had been in power for any length of time—weighed more with the country than their own merits, and Asquith was unsparing in his analysis

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, p. 73.



H. H. A.  
(About 1906)  
Library, 20 Cavendish Sq.





of the record of the Balfour Government, while reserving his main attack for the whole-hogging Protection advocated by Mr. Joseph Chamberlain. A passage from a speech at St. Andrews may bear quoting even after the lapse of time :

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“ When the nation was told that the advent of a Labour Party in the House of Commons, with a programme such as its leading members had put forward, brought this country within measurable or perilous distance of revolutionary change, he thought the question might be asked—‘ Who were the people from whose lips proceeded this charge ? ’ They were the lips of men who, if the country had given them their way, would have made by far the most revolutionary change in our system that had ever been propounded in our time. There was not an item put forward by these Labour colleagues in their programme which involved so fundamental, and certainly not so disastrous, a change in the conditions of life in this country, as the return from Free Trade to Protection.” (Jan. 19.)

The overwhelming Liberal triumph which followed<sup>1</sup> took all parties by surprise, and not least the Liberal leaders. They had believed that with good luck they would obtain a working majority, but had not been at all sure whether Lord Rosebery's Bodmin speech and Mr. Balfour's seemingly skilful seizure of the opportunity to wind up his Government and exploit the Irish question against its successors might not seriously prejudice their chances. It was this thought which had made the prospect of a new schism in the formation of the Government seem so ominous. The result surpassed the dream of the wildest optimist, and the question now was whether this enormous majority, including, as it did, Independent Labour and large numbers of new men with original ideas, might not prove an actual embarrassment to the Government. If this danger was avoided, it was mainly because the action of the Tory Party in the House of Lords compelled the whole Liberal Party to concentrate on a few simple issues on which there was and could be no difference of opinion.

### III

Chinese labour on the Rand had been the most embittered electioneering topic, and Asquith did his utmost to keep it within bounds. Looking at the legal position he considered the Prime Minister's promise to “ stop forthwith the recruitment and embarkation of Chinese coolies ” somewhat rash, and a reference to the Law

<sup>1</sup> Apart from Irish (83) and Labour (43), 377 Liberals were returned to the 1906 Parliament. The total of Government supporters was thus 513 to 167 Unionists, and even if all other parties had combined against them, Liberals alone would have been a majority of 84.

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officers at home and in the Transvaal confirmed this opinion. The Lieutenant-Governor, it appeared, had no power to revoke a licence to import coolies ; and even if he were armed with such a power by legislation, to make it retrospective and enforce it upon mineowners who had embarked considerable capital in making provision for the coolies would—legal opinion was unanimous—be harsh and unfair, unless accompanied by compensation. At various dates in the previous November licences had been issued for the embarkation of no less than 14,700 coolies ; and the question which presented itself immediately to the new Government was therefore whether their embarkation should be stopped at the cost of having to compensate the mineowners who had recruited the coolies. Asquith was strongly of opinion that this was impossible, and his view as a lawyer was fortified by his feelings as Chancellor of the Exchequer. It was impossible, he wrote to Campbell-Bannerman, to stop embarkation without legislation, and legislation “ would rouse a tremendous hubbub both here and there. It would involve the British taxpayer (who is without available funds) in indefinitely large claims for compensation and would not be necessary to fulfil your pledge.” Provided “ recruitment and embarkation ” could be read together as referring to one and the same transaction and the stoppage of embarkation be treated as part of the stoppage of *further* recruitment, the pledge would stand, but he was heartily in agreement with Campbell-Bannerman that the circumstances should be set out *before* the election ; and the Cabinet having so decided, Campbell-Bannerman made a speech explaining that the word “ forthwith ” in his declaration must be interpreted as applying to further embarkations when those already authorised were exhausted.

The question was finally settled on the basis that recruitment and the further embarkation consequent upon it should be stopped, and the question of what should be done with the 47,000 coolies already in the country or about to come there under licences already issued be left to the Transvaal Government about to be set up.<sup>1</sup> When the new Parliament met, there was grumbling on the Radical benches at the slowness of this process, but Asquith thought it far more satisfactory that the result should be achieved through the action of the Transvaal Government with, as it turned out, the hearty

<sup>1</sup> In the Letters Patent granting Responsible Government to the Transvaal, it was definitely laid down that within a year of the meeting of the Transvaal Legislature the Labour “ Ordinance was to be repealed and to cease to have effect ” ; and in June 1907, General Botha, who was now Prime Minister, announced that this would be done, and that the Chinese would be sent home immediately on the expiry of their contracts.

approval of the Transvaal people than that it should be forced on them by the Imperial Government. Meanwhile he had devoted a great deal of time and thought to the drafting of the new Transvaal Constitution which in the end owed much to his efforts and his keen sense of the legal problems involved. This was in a special sense a labour of love to him, for he had always maintained that the distinction between the Liberal and the Conservative supporters of the war would be discovered in their behaviour after it. The Liberals would be for the peace of reconciliation, the Conservatives in all probability for treating the former Boer Republics as conquered states. Being one of the former, Asquith felt himself under a special obligation to see that the Liberal view prevailed.

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## IV

It was unknown to the public and scarcely realised by most members of the Government that a serious European crisis was in progress during a large part of the month of December 1905, and for the first three weeks of January 1906—in fact, while British Ministers and politicians were almost wholly occupied in Government-forming and electioneering. There were many moments during this time when France and Germany seemed hopelessly at variance on the Morocco questions, and the Ministers responsible had seriously to face the possibility that a collision between them on a subject covered by the Anglo-French Convention would require Great Britain to go to the aid of France. The curious chapter of accidents which caused the highly important exchange of views on this subject between Sir Edward Grey and M. Cambon to come and go without being submitted to the Cabinet has been related elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> and need not be repeated here. Being out of London, and not one of the Ministers intimately concerned, Asquith did not hear of this transaction till some time after the event, but he strongly shared the view, which Sir Edward Grey expressed in after years, that it ought to have come before the Cabinet, and he has been heard to describe the omission as one of the most curious examples in his memory, of a concurrence of untoward events working to a conclusion which no one intended and no one could defend.

The happy issue of the Algeciras Conference ended these

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Campbell-Bannerman*, II, Chapter XXX. The theory that Campbell-Bannerman had been out-manceuvred or outwitted by Sir Edward Grey and Mr. Haldane was a favourite one with a certain school of politicians for some years after the facts became known, but this was finally disposed of by the documents published in the *Life of Campbell-Bannerman*.

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anxieties for the time being, but they were followed by a sharp crisis in which the Cabinet had to show its teeth to the Sultan of Turkey who had very audaciously occupied a key position in the Gulf of Akabah with the apparent intention of seizing the Sinai Peninsula and bringing the Turkish frontier up to the Eastern bank of the Suez Canal. Some members of the Cabinet were doubtful what their colleagues might say to the prompt and warlike measures proposed by the Foreign Office, but where Abdul Hamid was concerned, there was unanimity that force or the threat of it was the right remedy.

V

The common belief that a Chancellor of the Exchequer has a light task except in the few weeks when he is preparing his Budget was certainly not true so far as Asquith was concerned. He was Deputy Leader, as well as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and he did his utmost to ease Campbell-Bannerman's burden while his wife lay dangerously ill. Whenever a legal question came up, he ranked with the Lord Chancellor and the Secretary for War as one of the three leading legal authorities in the Cabinet, and was soon in consultation with the Law Officers on the thorny questions about to be raised in the Trade Disputes Bill. Then in his own Department, he had not only to prepare his Budget, but to receive a stream of deputations from industries and interests believing themselves to be threatened by the finance of a Radical Government. Mineowners, brewers, grocers, confectioners, all came protesting their unfitness or incapacity to shoulder further burdens, and some even asking relief from present burdens. All had to be consoled or put off. In handling deputations Asquith was reputed to be short and firm. His manner was always polite, but his cross-examination was searching, and those who approached him with the idea of making party capital or causing him embarrassment seldom came a second time.

Asquith's first Budget introduced on 30th April, could scarcely be more than humdrum. He had, as he told the House, "to deal with the finances of one year for which he was hardly at all responsible, and with the finances of another year for which, although he had direct responsibility, yet when he assumed it, he found the field of possible action already to a very large degree limited and circumscribed." He had had only four months to "survey a large tract of rough and tangled ground," and could do little more for the moment than straighten out certain tangles and promise for the

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future a serious effort towards the reduction of expenditure, the repayment of debt, and a readjustment of the incidence of taxation. As an instalment he took off the vexatious shilling a ton tax on exported coal, reduced the tea tax from 6d. to 5d. per pound, and made a small reduction in the duty on tobacco "strips" and added half a million to the sinking fund. Speaking in the manner of the time, he issued a grave warning about the growth of expenditure and debt. The total expenditure of the nation had now reached £144,000,000, and the debt (owing to the South African war) had increased by £150,000,000 since the year 1899. The Supply Services (i.e. Army, Navy, and Civil Service) were no less than £111,000,000, "a gigantic, and in my opinion an excessive sum." As a beginning of economy, he announced a reduction of £1,500,000 in Naval expenditure, which had stood at £33,389,000 in the previous year—an intimation which caused much perturbation at the Admiralty, and was the forerunner of many crises in that Department. In the meantime he appointed a strong Select Committee to explore the possibilities of graduation and differentiation in the Income Tax for action in the following year.

Judged by the standards of present expenditure, both the figures and the comments have a pleasant flavour of days beyond recall, but Asquith was judged to have done all that was possible in a short time, and his speech, which departed from the hallowed traditions of Budget day in being comparatively brief and compact, was much applauded. For the moment rich persons and wealthy interests which had feared the worst since the radical upheaval breathed again, and said that the Treasury at least was in safe hands. But the Budget being over, finance was the least part of Asquith's activities during this year. From now onwards to the end of the session in the third week of December the Government was engaged in a continuous and exhausting effort to get its three principal measures, its Education Bill, its Plural Voting Bill, and its Trade Disputes Bill, through the House of Commons, and before the end of the year was embarked on the struggle with the House of Lords which was to last continuously for the subsequent five years. On all these questions Asquith was called upon to play a leading part, and his interventions on critical occasions more than ever confirmed his reputation as the most formidable debater in the House. Campbell-Bannerman called him the "sledge-hammer," and on critical occasions when Asquith happened not to be in the House, he used to say to the Whips, "send for the sledge-hammer."

## VI

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The details of most of the Bills that failed or were killed beyond resurrection by the House of Lords in this session have now only a curious interest, but among those that survived the Trade Disputes Bill remains still a subject of lively controversy, and Asquith played a considerable part in that. The Bill as originally introduced followed the recommendations of the Royal Commission, appointed in 1903, on the main issues of (1) the relaxation of the law of conspiracy and of peaceful picketing, and (2) the exemption of Trade Union funds from liability in actions for damages for torts. On the first the Cabinet was agreed, but on the second there was a sharp difference of opinion in which the lawyers were on one side and the Prime Minister on the other. The lawyers objected to putting words into a statute which gave one class, Labour, a privilege not enjoyed by other classes, and were of opinion that the object aimed at could be attained, as the Royal Commission recommended, by restricting the law of agency in its application to Trade Unions. The Trade Unions, smarting under recent decisions of the Court of Appeal and the House of Lords, thought this altogether too subtle, and predicted that the Law Courts would run a coach and six through all fine distinctions of the kind proposed. The Prime Minister shared their opinion and could see no reason why, if the intention was to render Trade Union funds immune, the law should not say so straight out.

In the first round the lawyers won, and the Bill as introduced ran thus :

"Where a Committee of a Trade Union constituted as hereinafter mentioned has been appointed to conduct, on behalf of the Union, a trade dispute, an action whereby it is sought to charge the funds of the Union with damages in respect of any tortious act committed in contemplation or furtherance of the trade dispute should not lie, unless the act was committed by the Committee or by some person acting under their authority :

Provided that a person shall not be deemed to have acted under the authority of the Committee if the act was an act or one of a class of acts expressly prohibited by a resolution of the Committee, or the Committee by resolution expressly repudiate the act as soon as it is brought to their knowledge."

Trade Unionists and large numbers of Liberal and Radical M.P.'s read it backwards and forwards and professed themselves unable to make head or tail of it. With its "ifs" and "wheres," and "unlesses" and "provideds," it seemed to offer a multitude of loopholes

and loose-ends for clever lawyers to make play with. The party was gravely disturbed, and Labour said loudly that it was going to be betrayed once more. More insistently than ever the question was asked, if the intention was to exempt Trade Union funds, why not say so ?

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The opportunity of saying so came very quickly. The Government Bill was introduced and read a first time on 28th March, whereupon the Labour members decided at once to press forward with their own Bill, which was down for second reading as a Private Member's Bill on 30th March. This was moved by Mr. W. Hudson, and the debate had not gone far before it became clear that the Government was in a serious difficulty. At this point the Prime Minister took the matter into his own hands, and to the relief of his party, but to the surprise of his legal colleagues, supported Mr. Hudson's Bill and intimated that the way was open to adjust the difference between that Bill and the Government Bill.

The lawyers, and among them Asquith, were not a little annoyed by what they considered to be a forcing of their hands, and for the next few weeks their agreement to the adjustment which the Prime Minister had promised seemed very much in doubt. In moving the second reading on 25th April, Sir William Robson, the Solicitor-General, had to admit frankly that the question was still an open one, while promising that it would be settled in Committee after the Government had listened to all views. It was settled finally in Committee on 3rd August, when substantially the layman's view prevailed over the lawyer's. The clause as finally passed ran :

" An action against a Trade Union, whether of workmen or masters, or against any members or officials thereof, on behalf of themselves and all other members of the Trade Union in respect of any tortious act alleged to have been committed by or on behalf of the Trade Union, shall not be entertained by any Court."

To the end Asquith maintained his objection to writing into a statute any words which gave workmen, as such, a privilege not enjoyed by other citizens, and he only gave his consent to the clause on condition that the same immunity should be extended to Unions of masters as to Unions of men. This he considered sufficient to satisfy the principle, but he made his own preference for the original clause sufficiently clear in his speech in Committee :

" He thought that the simplest and most practical way of dealing with the matter was to alter the law of agency in its application to Trade Unions. He was not sure that he did not still think that there would have been the preferable course. There was another plan suggested—



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the plan embodied in the alternative clause of the Attorney-General—which was to exempt Trade Unions from liability even in cases where agency was established. He would never assent himself to a proposition of that kind, unless the same law was applied to the masters as to the men. . . . Therefore he could only assent to an arrangement which established perfect equality as between the combinations of masters and the combinations of men, and his objection in principle on this point was met by the alternative clause of his hon. and learned friend the Attorney-General. As he had said, he thought the balance of practical convenience would have been met by the adoption of the course which he had originally suggested. But he had to bear in mind two very important facts. The first was that the solution in the alternative clause commended itself to the vast majority of those concerned. That was not a decisive consideration ; but it was one that was not without weight. But a more important point was that upon the whole he had come to the conclusion—gradually, he admitted—that there was less risk of actual legislation on disputed questions going to the Courts of Law, passing from one stage of appeal to another, and involving loss of temper, money, and time, by adopting the perfectly simple and common-sense method embodied in the alternative clause, than if they were to lay down in regard to industrial combinations a new code of the law of agency.”<sup>1</sup>

The speech bears evidence of political distress, but he had carried his point as far as he thought wise or practicable at a moment when it was becoming more and more evident that the fate of the Government and the Liberal cause depended on unity among Liberal leaders. This was his sole difference of any importance with Campbell-Bannerman in the period in which he served with him as his principal lieutenant.

Asquith's general view on Trade Union law was that if you once departed from the general assumption which had served sufficiently well from the Act of 1871 up to the Taff Vale judgments, that Trade Unions were not suable in their funds, almost any solution was open to grave legal objection. It was one thing to get this principle accepted as part of public policy for the equalising of conditions between Capital and Labour, and quite another to define it in law. He was always impatient of the criticisms passed by the Trade Unionists on the Judges responsible for the Taff Vale and *Quinn v. Leatham* decisions, for he held these decisions to be sound in law and altogether inevitable, if the question was put to the test in the Courts. But he thought it a misfortune that the question had been raised and “ the long practical immunity,” as the Royal Commission termed it, disturbed.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons, 3rd August, 1906.

## VII

The year ended in strife and bitterness. Of the three principal measures of the session the Education Bill, the Plural Voting Bill, and the Trade Disputes Bill, the Lords had destroyed the first two and only spared the third (which they probably disliked most of all) in deference to the settled Conservative policy at that time of not challenging organised Labour. They had caused special irritation by their treatment of the Education Bill, which they had returned to the Commons with almost every clause turned inside out, and some reduced to nonsense. This they called a "reconstitution," but it was, as Asquith said, as if someone had changed the positives into negatives and the negatives into positives in the Ten Commandments and described the result by that name. Other measures, such as the Agricultural Holdings Bill and the Irish Town Tenants Bill, had been severely mauled.

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Even more important than the loss of the Bill or the waste of time and effort in the House of Commons was the inference to be drawn from these proceedings. If with its immense majority the Liberal Party was not to be presumed to possess a mandate for its Education Bill or for the modest change in the franchise law proposed in its Plural Voting Bill, what prospect lay before it? What but a perpetual ploughing of the sands in the House of Commons while the Unionist Party established the claim of one of its leaders that "whether in power or in opposition it would still control the destinies of the country?" The provocation was obvious, but the way of resenting it was by no means clear. There were voices in the Cabinet for a dissolution at the end of the year 1906, but the great majority were of opinion that nothing that had happened in one session could justify them in risking their strong position in Parliament and the Free Trade cause on an appeal to the country within twelve months of the previous election. Important as the Education Bill might be it was not big enough for the big issue which must presently arise. Instead of ploughing the sands, the watchword was now to be "filling up the cup." The cup of the Lords was to be filled until the electors could see and judge the full measure of their iniquities.

The Prime Minister opened the new phase in a resounding speech on the day when he announced the abandonment of the Education Bill as "reconstituted" by the House of Lords:

"It is plainly intolerable that a Second Chamber should, while one

1905-1906 party in the State is in power, be its willing servant, and when that  
Age 53-54 party has received unmistakable and emphatic condemnation by the country, be able to neutralise and thwart and distort the policy which the electors have shown they approve. That is a state of things to which for the nonce we must submit. A settlement of this great question of education has been prevented, and for that calamity we know, and the country knows on whom is the responsibility. The resources of the House of Commons are not exhausted, and I say with conviction that a way must be found, and a way will be found, by which the will of the people, expressed through their elected representatives in this House, will be made to prevail."—House of Commons, 20th December, 1906.

It was to fall to Asquith, some four and a half years later, to find the way.

## CHAPTER XV

### A TROUBLED SESSION

A visit to Rome—Budget and Old Age Pensions—Finding the money—A Two Years' Plan—A vexatious Session—House of Lords policy—Veto and Reform—Campbell-Bannerman's action—Asquith's support—A holiday in Scotland.

J. A. S.

AT the end of January 1907 Asquith went for a fortnight to Rome 1907  
to stay with his friend Lady Manners, and a letter to his wife gives Age 54-55  
a lively account of his doings :

ROME.

*Fri. 1 Feb. 1907.*

I expect I shall be back in England by the time this reaches you. It is a lovely day with hot sun, and I hope you are making a good journey to Hartham. . . .

Since I wrote, I have continued my sight-seeing and varied it with excursions into social and official life. On Wed. night we all went to a party given by Lady Egerton at the British Embassy—quite a pretty affair as the rooms are very big and “all Rome”—such as it is—was there. Yesterday I was entertained at a formal lunch by Tittoni who used to be ambassdr. in London and is now Foreign Minister here. I then went in the Embassy carriage to the Quirinal, where I was received with much state, and conducted to the King. I sat with him in a little room by ourselves and we talked for about an hour. He is a most intelligent level-headed man, and knows everything that is going on here and elsewhere; entirely without pomp or self-consciousness, and a strong Liberal. We had a very interesting talk, mainly about Italy, but he spoke quite freely of the German Emperor, the Czar, Alfonso, etc. He is curiously free from prejudice and spoke well of the Pope, who is made helpless by his surroundings. . . . But he said that in Italy, unlike Germany or France, there was no clerical question; the Church sends 5 members to the Chamber and they are divided into 3 parties! . . . I then went with Tittoni to the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies and watched them for a short time, but it was a dull sitting. . . . The ——'s gave a great dinner in the evening, but it was rather a fiasco, as the Prime Minister Giolitti arrived at the last moment unexpectedly, and the whole table had to be rearranged with disastrous consequences, everyone here being most particular about etiquette, precedence, etc. As poor D. is already in the blackest books of the fashionable world for a series of

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social *bêtises* (including the invitation of our Queen to tea when there was a corpse in the house which she met on the stairs) this brings her Roman career to an unhappy climax. I had a talk with Giolitti who is a clever man, but rather a ruffian to look at. . . .

Asquith was back in London just before the opening of Parliament on 12th February, and was plunged at once into Estimates and Budget. The subject which was most in his mind in these days was Old Age Pensions. Among all the "social services" now being talked of none appealed to him more than the making of a modest provision at State cost for the aged poor. He saw in it none of the difficulties and dangers that old-fashioned orthodoxy discovered. He thought it mere humanity to give old men and women past work this shelter from the workhouse, and he was convinced that, far from discouraging thrift or undermining character, the added sense of security would be helpful to both. If he had any special ambition when he became Chancellor of the Exchequer it was to provide the means to this end. To a deputation which waited on him and the Prime Minister he said that he was in favour of a "universal plan altogether dissociated from the Poor Law," and that the Government "regarded the question as one of the most extreme urgency."

This was the first intimation after ten years of vague sympathy and conditional pledges that something was really going to be done. But the finding of the money was by no means plain sailing, and Asquith decided that it could only be done by planning for two years ahead, economising wherever possible in the meantime, and gradually accumulating the required surplus. A hard battle for the promised economies in expenditure was fought in the Departments during the winter months of 1906 and 1907, and the Admiralty defended itself to such purpose that the saving of £1,500,000 expected in that quarter came down to £450,000. On the other hand Mr. Haldane, the Secretary for War, who was by now embarked on his great scheme of Army reorganisation, yielded £2,000,000 when he had only been asked for £17,000—a miracle of economy which justly earned him the gratitude of his old friend, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Revenue meanwhile came in well, and by the end of March 1907 Asquith saw his way to a Budget which would bring Old Age Pensions in sight and at the same time institute the reforms in Income Tax foreshadowed in his Budget speech of the previous year.

This, Asquith's second Budget, was introduced on 18th April, and the feature by which it is generally remembered is the differentiation which it made for the first time between earned and unearned income. Taking the normal rate of Income Tax at 1s. in the £, he

proposed that when the total income, earned and unearned, did not exceed £2000, the earned part of it should not pay more than nine-pence. There was the expected objection that income from invested savings also was earned and ought to share the benefit. The answer was that the difficulty of tracing investments back to their origin was insurmountable, but that this ought not to prevent the distinction being made, as it could easily be, for the earned part of the yearly income. Time and custom have long sanctioned this part of the British fiscal system and it has since been adopted by several other countries.

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Most important of all in Asquith's mind, he now saw his way to the starting of Old Age Pensions in the following year. The previous year had shown a realised surplus of £5,400,000, and on the same basis of taxation the estimated surplus for the current year (1907-1908) was £4,000,000. This ordinarily would have justified larger remissions of taxation than the £2,000,000, which the allowance on earned incomes was estimated to cost. But instead of remitting taxation Asquith proposed to keep the balance in hand, or to speak strictly, to apply it to the Sinking Fund for the current year only, and to earmark it together with sundry other sums, such as the yield from a slight increase in death duties, for Old Age Pensions in the following years.

This cautious approach to the finding of a few millions for what the Government had declared to be an extremely urgent purpose may well seem unheroic to the daring financiers of later days, but it was in the spirit of the times, and no part of Asquith's Budget speech was more warmly approved than that in which he preached the necessity of foresight and continuity from year to year in financial policy. In 1907 he was looking ahead to yet another task which he assigned himself for the following year, and that was, as he told the House, to "sweep away root and branch" the whole system by which assigned revenue, the proceeds of Imperial taxes were intercepted from the Exchequer and handed over to local authorities; and to substitute for it the payment of equivalent grants based on the existing receipts but not dependent on or absorbing the yields of particular taxes. To release the Treasury from this bondage Asquith held to be imperative, and his achievement of that object may be reckoned still as one of his principal contributions to Treasury practice.

The speech in which these plans were developed was hailed as a masterly performance. The House was packed; the Prince of Wales sat "over the clock," the usual crowd of experts and

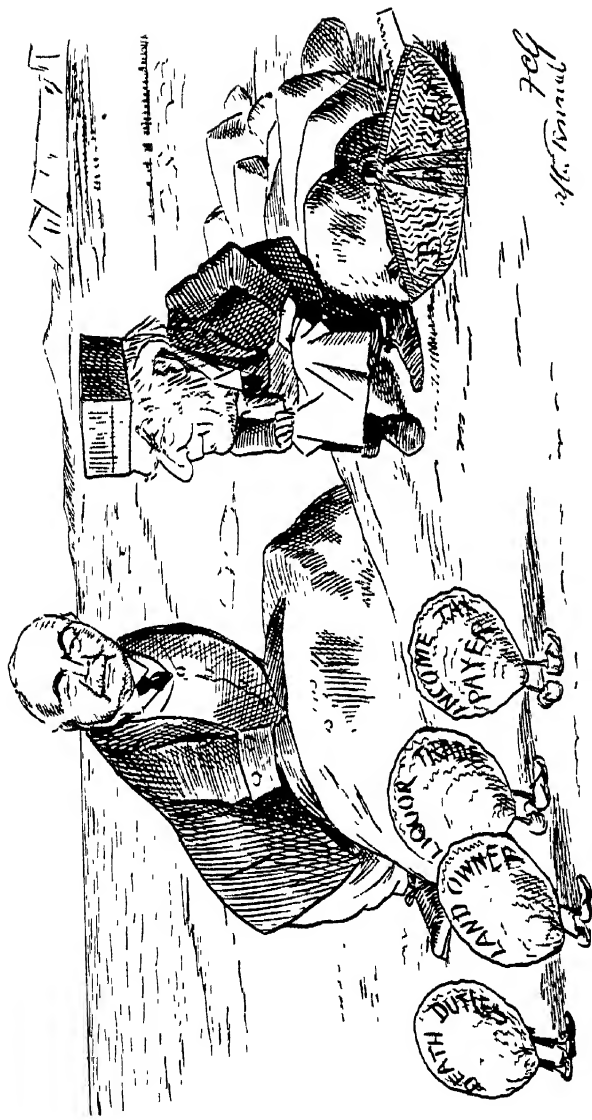
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distinguished strangers was in the galleries. "You may like to know," Sir George Murray wrote to Mrs. Asquith on the following day, "from a, perhaps, partial, but certainly experienced source, that it was a great speech, above the average all through, and rising in some places to levels which nobody in our time except Mr. Gladstone has ever reached. I can't say more, can I?" "In the first rank, worthy to stand with the great performances of the great Chancellors," was Haldane's verdict. "No one speaks quite like Henry," his wife confided to her Diary, "he seems to run rather a bigger show; he can keep to the ground, cut into it or leave it without ever being ridiculous, boring, or wanting in taste, and he is never too long. He gives a feeling of power more than of grace or charm and a very happy choice of words." One special merit found in his speech was, again, its comparative brevity. Three days before, he had written to his wife, "I find that Mr. G. in introducing his great Budget in 1853 spoke for  $4\frac{3}{4}$  hours! At any rate I shan't get to that." He was, in fact, just over two hours.

## II

The session of 1907 was full of vexation for the Government and its supporters. The Irish Councils Bill intended to be the first step in the "step-by-step" policy of Home Rule and the longest that could be justified, in view of the pledge given at the election, was summarily rejected by an Irish Convention held in Dublin; the Licensing Bill rather rashly given first place in the King's Speech was on second thoughts kept back on the ground that it would be trying the House of Commons too high to spend the greater part of another session on a measure which was even surer of destruction in another place than the Education Bill of the previous year; and the Peers meantime concentrated their attack on the Land Valuation and Scottish Small Holdings Bills, the former of which they rejected on the second reading and the latter of which they threatened with such disfigurement that the Government decided to withdraw it. This might be "filling the cup," but Liberal members and the Liberal Party grew restive and called loudly for the redemption of the Prime Minister's pledge to "find a way" of resenting these injuries.

But rhetorical phrases were one thing and a practical measure quite another. Even Conservatives were agreed that something must be done, and the Peers themselves declared their readiness, even their anxiety, to be "reformed." One of their number, Lord



Westminster Gazette  
March 29, 1907

"He says that since the M.P. has  
to look for many things,  
offences for poor dogs, for  
and other social things."

## The Carpenter and the Bygones

"Put out on us," the Bygones cried,  
turning a little blue,  
"But such a surplus that would be  
A downy thing to do?"





Newton, had produced a Bill, and another, Lord Cawdor, had moved for a Select Committee to inquire into the subject. But whereas Conservatives interpreted "reform" as the setting up of a second Chamber which would be an even stronger bulwark against radical or subversive legislation, Liberals interpreted it as the removal of an obstacle which had brought Liberal and Progressive legislation to a standstill.

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The Prime Minister was strongly of opinion that if the Government let themselves be lured on to the ground of "reform," they would be lost. There were a hundred possible schemes of "reform," and contention about them would be endless. The powers, he urged, were the main thing at the present time; let them concentrate on curtailing the powers of the existing House and leave others who came after to change its composition, if they cared to do so.

This was by no means the view of all members of the Cabinet, and there was sharp contention before it prevailed. But by the beginning of the year 1907 it had been decided to deal with powers at all events in the first stage, and the Cabinet Committee appointed to explore the ground proceeded on that basis. What followed has been described in Campbell-Bannerman's Life :<sup>1</sup>

"This Committee presently produced a scheme for joint sittings between a delegation of the House of Lords and the House of Commons sitting in its full numbers. In case of disagreement it was proposed that a hundred peers, among whom all members of the Administration were to be included, should debate and vote with the Commons, and that divisions thus taken in this joint Assembly should be final. To this plan Campbell-Bannerman took strong exception, first on the constitutional ground that a voting Conference between Lords and Commons would put the power of the Lords on an equality with that of the Commons—an anti-democratic innovation which he thought a Liberal Government should be the last to introduce; and next on the practical ground that it would be fatal to Liberal Governments unless they had a majority of at least 100. Such a scheme might serve well enough to tide over emergencies in the present Parliament with its enormous Liberal majority, but it might easily be a sentence of death for future Liberal Governments with normal majorities. For, if this method were accepted as the legally constituted way of settling differences between the two Houses, the claim would certainly be set up that Parliament had deliberately decided that no legislation to which the Peers objected should be passed unless their delegation could be outvoted in the joint sitting."

Campbell-Bannerman now took the strong and rather unusual course of issuing a memorandum<sup>2</sup> to his colleagues against the scheme of his own Cabinet Committee. In this he submitted that

<sup>1</sup> Vol. II, p. 350-1.

<sup>2</sup> For the text of this Memorandum see *Life of Campbell-Bannerman*, II, 351, 355.

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scheme to a searching analysis, and set up against it the plan of the suspensory veto, originally proposed by John Bright, which for long had been his own favourite method of dealing with the question. According to this, if a measure was rejected by the House of Lords, or so altered that the House of Commons was unable to accept its amendments, there was to be first a Conference between the two Houses in the manner suggested by the Cabinet Committee ; but if that failed, the Bill might be introduced again in the form last agreed to by the House of Commons in the next session ; and if passed again in that form by the House of Commons and again rejected or defaced by the House of Lords, it was to become law in spite of the opposition of that House.

There were still sharp debates in the Cabinet, but in the end Campbell-Bannerman persuaded his colleagues that nothing less than his proposal would redeem his promise to "find a way" of making the will of the Commons prevail ; and on 24th June he moved a resolution proposing the Suspensory Veto as the basis of legislation in the following session. Thus was the foundation laid of the policy which not in the following session, but four years later, Asquith was to carry to its conclusion after a fierce struggle in which not only Parliament but the Crown became involved.

Asquith, though not the originator of this scheme, gave it his hearty support, and used all his influence to obtain a united Cabinet for it. He wound up the third night of a stormy debate with a speech in which he arraigned the House of Lords as a purely partisan Assembly. Lord Percy, who preceded him, had claimed that it gave effect to the will of the people. "The truth is," he replied, "that whatever the noble Lord's theory may suggest, the House of Lords gives effect to the will of the House of Commons when you have a Tory majority ; the House of Lords frustrates the will of the House of Commons when you have got a Liberal majority ; and neither in the one case nor in the other does it consider—what, indeed, it has no means of ascertaining—the will of the people."

For once there was no autumn session, and when Parliament rose at the end of August, Ministers who had been at work almost without a break for nearly two years, were free to take a holiday, or as much of it as pursuing red boxes, incessant correspondence, public speeches, Cabinet meetings, and attendances at offices in London permitted. This year Asquith and his family spent most of August and September at a house which he had taken, Highfield, near Dingwall, on the Moray Firth. But from this time onwards most of their holidays were spent at Archerfield, a fine Adam house on the lovely

Wash between Edinburgh and North Berwick, which Mrs. Asquith's brother, Frank Tennant, had lent them. He and his family lived in North Berwick, and had leased Archerfield for the shooting. There was scarcely a day that the Tennant children did not spend either on the shore or on the golf links with the Asquith family, and Mrs. Asquith was often heard to say that after her own home—Glen—Archerfield was the place she most cared for in the world. He and she usually went there in September, and stayed over the Christmas holidays. It was within easy reach of Dalmeny, and Whittingehame, and they saw Mr. Arthur Balfour both in his own home, and on the links. The whole Asquith family played golf, and though with the exception of (General) Arthur Asquith and Raymond, they were not good players, Asquith played well enough to enjoy himself. Neither his wife nor he (except for a brief spell in 1875) had ever had a golf club in their hands until they went to St. Andrews in 1895, but till the year of his death, it was the game that he said he would most have liked to play well.

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The Christmas of 1907 was the first spent at Archerfield, and the climate was so mild that Mrs. Asquith records in her Diary that they lunched out of doors in the woods on New Year's Day. During this year life in the Asquith family had been darkened by the death of Mrs. Asquith's baby. It was born in 20 Cavendish Square in February, and died two days after a dangerous confinement. Mrs. Asquith was so ill for months after this keen disappointment and the insomnia which followed that she speaks in her *Memories* of having prayed in St. Paul's Cathedral to die rather than hamper her husband when he became Prime Minister in 1908. It was her fifth child, and the doctors thought it inadvisable that she should ever have another. The birth of the first child involved an operation in which it had lost its life; the second—Elizabeth<sup>1</sup>—was born in 1897; the third only lived a few hours; the fourth, Anthony—better known as Puffin—was born in 1902, and the birth and death of the last in February 1907 had reduced her to a shadow.

The only pleasure of that year was Raymond Asquith's marriage, which took place on 25th July, to Katharine Horner, the daughter of old and much loved friends, Sir John and Lady Horner, in whose house (Mells Park) Asquith and his wife had spent the first part of their honeymoon. Mrs. Asquith writes in her diary: "He and Katharine are the most perfect combination of in-loveness and friendship marrying at the right age, after the right knowledge of each other that I have ever known."

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth married Prince Antoine Bibesco.

## CHAPTER XVI

### ASQUITH'S FIRST GOVERNMENT

Last days of Campbell-Bannerman—Asquith as Prime Minister—Kissing hands at Biarritz—King Edward's reluctance to return to London—Mr. Morley's Peerage—An offer to Swinburne—The Liberal team. J. A. S.

1908    ON 12th February, 1908, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman made his  
Age 55 last speech in the House of Commons. The next day he was unable to leave his bed, and was from that time onwards a dying man. But he spoke of his illness as "an accident, just like a broken leg," and for several weeks was persuaded that he would recover.

On 2nd March, "having had an excellent night following an equally good day," he wrote<sup>1</sup> cheerfully to Asquith, both about his own state of health and about the prospects of the Government, and wound up with an expression of gratitude to his colleagues, "and above all to yourself," which drew the following reply :

*March 3, 1908.*

I read your letter to the Cabinet, and in their name I have to congratulate you on the clear evidence it affords of your mental vigour and of your close and continuous interest in all our affairs.

The Cabinet are most anxious that you should feel that, much as you are missed, they are not only content but eager that you should be relieved of all weary and avoidable responsibility for as long a time as may be needed for your complete restoration to health. They hope that the time may be short, but there is nothing that they would deprecate more than that you, or your advisers, should feel that there is any need for hurry.

We all value, and no one more than I, your kind expressions which go far beyond what any of us feel that we deserve.

Yours always,

H. H. ASQUITH.

On 4th March King Edward visited Campbell-Bannerman in his sick room in Downing Street, and on the following day departed for Biarritz, in the hope and belief that no change would be necessary before his return six weeks later. Before he went the King also saw

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman*, II, p. 381.

Asquith, who described the interview in a letter to his wife the same evening : 1908  
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*To his Wife.*

10 DOWNING ST.

*Mar. 4, 1908.*

I had quite a pleasant interview with the King after the Privy Council yesterday. He talked sensibly about the Licensing Bill and other such matters, and said generally that he thought the offices in the present Government were very well filled, and that he would be sorry to see anything in the nature of a general shuffling of the cards. The only exception he made was —, whom he is anxious to get rid of, and to see Bron (Lord Lucas) of whom he spoke highly in his place. He had heard gossip that Winston was anxious to get into the Cabinet keeping his present office of Under-Secretary. He was opposed to this and said that Queen Victoria had vetoed a similar proposal by Rosebery in favour of E. Grey when he was Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs. I said that Winston had every claim to Cabinet rank and that he had behaved very well when twice passed over for Loulou and McKenna, both of whom had inferior claims. The King agreed and was quite warm in his praise of Winston, but thought he must wait till some real Cabinet Office fell vacant.

He said he had quite made up his mind to send for me at once in the event of anything happening to C.-B., or of his sending in his resignation. He thought it a pity C.-B. would not go to the Lords, and said there was no inconsistency in his doing so with his House of Lords policy. I told him I was sure C.-B. would never do it. He said he thought C.-B. very useful so long as he was equal to the job, as making things smooth and keeping people together. But it was evident that he was breaking up, and we must provide for the future : what were my plans ? I told him I should do as little as possible—probably nothing—to alter the composition of the Cabinet or shift the men, at any rate until after the Session was over, and that in the meantime at any rate I should keep the Exchequer. He didn't know that this had ever been done, but I reminded him that Mr. G. combined the Offices twice, not to mention Pitt and others. He said it would be far the best arrangement. He talked a little all over the place, smoking a cigar, about Roosevelt, Macedonia, Congo, etc. He said that if a change became necessary he hoped I would at once come out to him at Biarritz. He was very agreeable, and ended by asking after you. Altogether it was quite a satisfactory interview.

From the beginning of March onwards Campbell-Bannerman grew rapidly worse, and the position now became one of great embarrassment for his colleagues, and especially Asquith, who was presiding over the Cabinet and leading the House of Commons in his absence. With the King at Biarritz and the Prime Minister unable to attend to urgent business, the Government of the country was very nearly in abeyance during the month of March. But the King was anxious that the Prime Minister's resignation, if it became

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necessary, should be deferred until his return, and the Cabinet were anxious to do nothing which could give pain to their Chief or cause him to despond about his condition. All through March the Government marked time with the sense of change hanging over it, postponing important decisions and speculating on the future, which for some of its members had become somewhat uncertain.

On 27th March, Campbell-Bannerman sent for Asquith and told him that he was dying. He was brave and cheerful, spoke of his funeral, of the text he had chosen to be put on his grave, and then turned the subject deliberately for a few minutes to things of the hour, "patronage, titles, bishoprics," and ended by thanking Asquith for being a "wonderful colleague, so loyal, so disinterested, so able." "You are the greatest gentleman I ever met. This is not the last of me; we will meet again, Asquith," were his parting words.

An amiable wish to study the King's convenience joined, it may be, with a natural desire to die in harness, had led Campbell-Bannerman to prolong the situation, but at the end of March his doctors advised him that retirement was necessary for his own relief. So on 1st April he dictated a letter to the King warning him that the formal submission of his resignation was on the way. This crossed a telegram from the King urging that this step should be deferred to the Easter vacation, but strong representations went out to Biarritz as to the impossibility of this delay, and on 3rd April the King telegraphed from Biarritz reluctantly accepting the resignation.

It had been generally expected that the King would return to London for the appointment of the new Prime Minister and the consequent Ministerial changes. But departing from the usual practice, King Edward decided to stay at Biarritz, and awaited the formal submission by messenger. Then he wrote with his own hand to Asquith :

*King Edward to Asquith.*

BIARRITZ.

*Apr. 4.*

The King has received a letter from the Prime Minister tendering his resignation of the important post he occupies, owing to the very precarious state of his health and also by the advice of the medical men who are attending him. Under these circumstances the King regrets that he has no other alternative but to accept the resignation, and has answered Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman to that effect.

The King now calls on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to form a government, and will be glad to see him here at any time that he can conveniently come in order to hear from him what proposals he has to make.

Ministers were already chafing at the delay, and the King's desire that Asquith should come to Biarritz evoked audible protests. *The Times* and other newspapers characterised the appointment of a Prime Minister on foreign soil as an "inconvenient and dangerous departure from precedent": politicians complained that Asquith's absence would fatally disarrange the House of Commons timetable. These objections were pointed out, but the King was firm that Asquith should come to him even if the House of Commons had to rearrange its business.<sup>1</sup>

Saturday, 5th April, was spent feverishly in interviewing colleagues and putting the last touches to the revised list of Ministers to be submitted to the King. The news was now out, and there is a characteristic glimpse of Asquith in his wife's Diary shutting himself up against the sixty newspaper men who came to Cavendish Square and stubbornly refusing to disclose either his own plans or the King's, or the time of his departure for Biarritz, if he went, or anything else that was requisite for the desired "news story." He slipped away on Sunday afternoon, and reported himself "comfortably lodged in the King's Hotel, Biarritz," the following evening. He wrote to his wife the following day:

*To his Wife.*

BIARRITZ.

*April 6, 1908.*

This morning I put on a frock coat, and escorted by Fritz and old Stanley Clarke went to the King, who was similarly attired. I presented him with a written resignation of the office of Chr. of the Exr., and he then said, "I appoint you P.M. and 1st Lord of the Treasury," whereupon I knelt down and kissed his hand. *Voilà tout!*

He then asked me to come into the next room and breakfast with him. We were quite alone for an hour, and I went over all the appointments with him. He made no objection to any of them and discussed the various men very freely and with a good deal of shrewdness.

I am going to dine in his company at Mrs. Cassel's villa to-night. The weather here is vile beyond description, pouring rain and plenty of wind. I leave here at 12 noon to-morrow (Thursday) and arrive Charing Cross 5.12 Friday afternoon.

The Ministerial changes were important, and not least the appointment of Mr. Lloyd George to be Chancellor of the Exchequer. It will be seen that Asquith had changed his mind about retaining the Chancellorship of the Exchequer for himself between the end of

<sup>1</sup> It was whispered at one moment that King Edward entertained the idea of holding the Privy Council at which Ministers were to kiss hands in Paris, where he had intended to stay on his way home. Asquith, however, was firm on the point that this ceremony should take place in London.



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February when he saw the King in London, and on 8th April, when he kissed hands at Biarritz. The other principal changes were the substitution of Lord Crewe for Lord Elgin at the Colonial Office, and of Mr. McKenna for Lord Tweedmouth at the Admiralty, and the promotion to the Cabinet of Mr. Winston Churchill as President of the Board of Trade, and Mr. Runciman as President of the Board of Education. Lord Tweedmouth, whose health had for some time been causing uneasiness, became President of the Council, but this consolation prize gave him no great satisfaction; and Lord Elgin, who was unaffectedly surprised at his displacement, declined the Marquisate which was offered him. He had been a faithful administrator but he had taken little part in the collective work of the Government either in Parliament or on the platform, and Asquith was anxious that the highest offices should be filled by younger men who would bring political strength to his Ministry. Of Lord Crewe's ability and wisdom in council he had always the highest opinion.

The change which most surprised the public was the grant of a Viscounty to Mr. John Morley. Lord Morley has himself described<sup>1</sup> how this came about:

"It was one afternoon at this time<sup>2</sup> that Asquith came to my official room at the House of Commons, and told me that he understood the King, then at Biarritz, would send for him to kiss hands as the new Head of the Government. 'Yes, of course,' I said, 'there could be no thought of anything else, that is quite certain.' He hoped I should remain with him, and would like to know if I had any views for myself. 'I suppose,' I said, 'that I have a claim from seniority of service for your place at the Exchequer, but I don't know that I have any special aptitude for it under present prospects; and I am engaged in an extremely important and interesting piece of work. As you know, my heart is much in it, and I should be sorry to break off. So, if you approve, I will stay at the India Office, and go to the House of Lords.' 'Why on earth should you go there?' 'Because, though my eye is not dim, nor my natural force abated, I have had a pretty industrious life and I shall do my work all the better for the comparative leisure of the other place.' He made no sort of difficulty; so, after cordial words of thanks from him and good wishes from me, we parted."

Among the congratulations which poured in on him, Asquith valued none more than those which came from old Oxford and especially old Balliol friends such as Sir Alfred Milner and Lord Curzon. If he could have desired anything at this moment it would have been that men like Jowett and Thomas Hill Green might have been alive to see that their belief in him had been justified. One of

<sup>1</sup> *Recollections*, pp. 248-9.

<sup>2</sup> i.e. early in April.

his first acts as Prime Minister was to offer a pension to the poet, Swinburne, another famous son of Balliol. The offer was declined in a graceful letter :

“ You must not think me insensible to the cordial courtesy of your letter,” wrote the poet, “ if I decline the offer of a pension. But the remembrance of Jowett, a friend to whom I owe a debt of regard which, after his death, I did what I could to repay, gives me pleasure in offering to another old Balliol man my own equally cordial acknowledgment of his courtesy.”

We may pause here to glance at the team of which Asquith now found himself the leader. They were a company of exceptionally distinguished and brilliant men, and if eloquence, learning, literary accomplishment, and long experience in affairs are of value to the State, he was well fortified. Colleagues fall naturally into groups ; the veterans of long service and the younger men coming for the first time into the Cabinet or the Government. The principal veterans were Lord Ripon, whose Cabinet service dated from Palmerstonian times ; Lord Morley, who had been Mr. Gladstone's right hand man twenty years earlier ; and Lord Loreburn, the Lord Chancellor, who as Sir Robert Reid—familiarily known as “ Bob Reid,” and like Asquith, a son of Balliol—had been Solicitor-General in Lord Rosebery's Government.

Ripon inspired a great affection in all who worked with him. His sincere devotion to principles, his desire to help in any and every way, his entire freedom from jealousy and vanity made him the ideal Cabinet Minister of the old school. His quiet and dignified departure on a conscientious scruple remote from politics was in keeping with his whole life. Asquith, in common with all the younger Liberals, had a great respect and liking for him, and thought it a privilege to have him in his Cabinet.

Morley and Loreburn were less easy bed-fellows. They were not, like Ripon, at the end of their careers ; they had played conspicuous parts in the South African dissensions of the party ; and the succession of Asquith as Prime Minister, though unchallengeable, almost inevitably appeared to them as the triumph of the school of Liberalism which they had steadily opposed. They were the older men with a longer record of service, and he was the younger who had passed them on the road. Asquith and Loreburn never, as the saying is, hit it off. Loreburn was never wholly reconciled to seeing Asquith in the first place, and his suspicion that the foreign policy of the Government was coloured by the latent jingoism of the

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Imperialist section broke out into open (and retrospective) hostility in later years when he had left the Cabinet. The different temperaments of the two men made confidence and intimacy between them difficult, and Lord Loreburn for the most part kept within his legal Department, which he ruled with an iron hand, brooking no interference.

With Morley the case was different. Asquith took the greatest pleasure in Morley's society. His charming manners and delightful talk, his spacious and discursive way of approaching even small things, were all after Asquith's own heart, and made for a real intimacy which helped at difficult moments. That Morley was often difficult it would be idle to deny. He was always hinting at resignation ; he had grievances and discontents of which the most earnest research failed to discover the whys and wherefores ; he seemed to shrink from the means to ends which he greatly desired. He could be at the same time very angry and very charming, and which he meant to be was not always easy to decide. Through it all Asquith was patient and tactful, and, if occasionally he permitted himself a humorous or impatient comment, he had a high sense of Morley's value to the Government, and knew that he was worth the pains it sometimes took to keep him.

It was said in after days that Asquith had no party in his own Government. He held the balance so evenly between left wing and right wing, and was so fair to all that none could claim him as a partisan. This was true, but it required a certain suppression of the old Adam in a man who was given to strong preferences and antipathies. There were times when the air seemed to vibrate with his unspoken comments. But his friendships were warm and constant ; and there were certain men whose judgments and counsels he trusted supremely. He was perfectly in step with Edward Grey ; the two men seemed to know each other's minds instinctively, and through all the difficult years that followed their pre-established harmony saved the friction and trouble that so often set in between Prime Ministers and Foreign Secretaries. Another special confidant was Lord Crewe, to whose wisdom, fairness, and coolness in emergencies he so often bore witness. Haldane, the earliest friend of all, had also his special footing, and Asquith's respect and admiration for this old friend's unceasing activities and far-reaching interests were only qualified, if at all, by occasional perplexity at his metaphysical approach to seemingly simple objects. To follow Haldane into the clouds needed, as he used to say, a special kind of education which he had not had. Then, there was Augustine Birrell, who also

had a special footing. Asquith delighted in his originality, his strong gusts of common sense, his appreciation of queer characters in politics and literature. Politics and literature mixed up in an hour with Birrell were among the refreshments that he most enjoyed.

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Others who were younger in years but veterans in politics were Herbert Gladstone, Sydney Buxton, Lewis Harcourt, Lord Fitzmaurice, and John Burns. Some of these were intimate friends, especially Gladstone and Buxton who had, so to speak, grown up with him in political life, and with all there was the familiarity of long association. Ill health withdrew Fitzmaurice after eighteen months, but it was a special pleasure to Asquith to have been able to bring him into the Cabinet for even a short time, for he held his work as a historian and student of politics to be of high value. Not to worry Ministers in their Departments was his general rule, and he resisted much pressure to disturb the "crusted Conservatism" which was alleged against John Burns in his conduct of the Local Government Board. If there was any one Department on which he specially kept his eye, it was the Home Office. He had filled it himself, and he knew the difficulties and the manifold opportunities it offers for getting a Government into trouble.

There was in the early years a paternal quality in his relations to Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. He was greatly attracted by both; he liked their exuberance and vitality, and when they got into scrapes, was apt to look on with amused indulgence. At one time a combination of Asquith and Lloyd George—each supplying what was deficient in the other—seemed likely to be for a long period the dominant power in British politics, but the ultimate tests revealed differences of character and temperament which were bound to clash. Being what he was, Lloyd George became of necessity a standing challenge to the classical tradition of Asquith. Of the younger men coming for the first time into the Cabinet, McKenna and Runciman seemed to supply the element of precision and efficiency that a modern Government needs. McKenna had married the daughter of Lady Jekyll, one of Asquith's oldest friends, and gained his special footing partly that way, but Asquith had great trust in him and rated his abilities very high. McKenna and Lloyd George were not fated to appreciate each other, and Asquith was often hard put to it to compose their differences in a manner which did justice to both, but whatever the result, he never grudged the pains and was determined, if he could, to keep both.

Outside the Cabinet were the very able group of legal officers—W. S. Robson, S. T. Evans, Thomas Shaw, Alexander Ure—presently

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to be reinforced by Rufus Isaacs and Stanley Buckmaster—with whom as a lawyer he had a special touch. Robson was one of his most intimate friends, and he had the highest opinion of his legal capacity and brilliant Parliamentary gifts. Among the younger men holding the lesser offices were George Lambert, and Francis Acland, the son of his old friend, Arthur Acland, and two others—soon to have Cabinet rank—whom from the first he regarded as coming men, Herbert Samuel and Charles Masterman, the latter unhappily destined to have only a brief career in which he won special distinction by brilliant work in and out of Parliament during the Sickness and other Insurance controversies of 1912 and 1913. As Under Secretary to the Home Office, Mr. Samuel helped him to pilot his Licensing Bill through the House of Commons, and he said more than once that of its kind this was as faultlessly efficient a Parliamentary performance as he could remember. Four others who came in due time to the Cabinet were McKinnon Wood, Charles Hobhouse, Colonel Seely, and Lord Lucas. Lucas, the “Bron Herbert” of the earlier days, was a beloved friend of the inner circle whose death in the War was a heavy grief, but all had Parliamentary gifts or other qualities which early in the life of the Government Asquith marked down as qualifying for succession to the Cabinet. “Jack Pease” (afterwards Lord Gainford) who now became Chief Whip was always in favour with Asquith, who had a high opinion of his administrative abilities. Another young man whom it was naturally a pleasure to have associated with him was his brother-in-law, “Jack” Tennant—successively Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade, Financial Secretary and Under Secretary for War, and Secretary for Scotland—whose industry, competence, and nimbleness at question time won him the respect of the House. Yet another with whom later he was to have intimate personal as well as political relationships was Edwin Montagu.

Every Government has its “characters,” and there were three especially in his first Government for whom Asquith had a warm regard. First Lord Carrington, afterwards Marquess of Lincolnshire, country gentleman and radical politician (very shrewd of his kind), racy of speech, simple, straight and trusty in character, who became President of the Board of Agriculture. Next, Lord Althorp, filling the office of Lord Chamberlain, the “Bobby Spencer” of old days, immaculate in dress and choking high collar, who had explained to the House of Commons that he “was not an agricultural labourer,” but who was in fact quite a serious man under a rather deceptive exterior. Third, but not last, Alec Murray, Master of Elibank, for

the moment Comptroller of the Household, but soon to succeed Jack Pease as Chief Whip. In the coming years the Master was to be the busiest of politicians, and no picture of any crisis is complete without being mentally filled in with his figure behind the scenes, indefatigably at work building bridges, combining incompatibles, sympathising with all grievances, and when any two of the team were quarrelling, explaining to each in turn what charming things the other was saying about him behind his back. He thought Asquith and Lloyd George working together to be the ideal political combination, and up to the time of his death, he continued to believe that, if he had remained on the scene, he could have prevented their rupture.

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Such was the team with which Asquith started as Prime Minister, and, while modestly appraising his own part, he maintained to the end that it was "a great Government." But across the floor of the House were other men who were to be equally important to his fortunes in the coming years, and especially John Redmond, the leader of the Irish party. Though Redmond's life had been spent as a leader of insurgents in the political wilderness, he and Asquith had fundamentally much in common. Both were above all things House of Commons men, both in their approach to Parliament and in their manner of speech were in the classical tradition. Behind the scenes the two men understood each other perfectly, and needed no voluminous explanations to see and make allowance for each other's difficulties. There was much plain speaking, as the records show, but never or scarcely ever a misunderstanding. Trust in Asquith on the part of the Irish was to count for a great deal in the years that followed, for there were many occasions on which the Government might easily have been wrecked, if trickery or dishonesty had been suspected on either side. Asquith was on good terms with all the Irish leaders, but he had a special liking for "Joe Devlin," whose ready wit and brilliant parliamentary impromptus won his warm admiration.

Relations with the Opposition were to be greatly strained in the coming years, and though he bore it with great dignity, Asquith certainly took no pleasure in the denunciation which descended upon his head. To draw this lightning seemed to be the positive aim of some of his colleagues, but, whether directed against himself or others, all noise and tumult offended Asquith. He thought "unity in difference" to be the essence of English politics, and saw no inconsistency between private friendships and public differences. At times he incurred a good deal of criticism for his intimacy with

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Opposition leaders, some of whom, and especially Balfour, had been close and life-long friends. Campbell-Bannerman looked askance at these friendships, and thought they should be confined to the ordinary courtesies of occasional intercourse. This was never Asquith's view. He liked clever people of all the political camps, and thought free intercourse between them likely to correct the more dangerous misunderstandings of opposing points of view which threaten not only party but national interests. Friendships of this kind were to be severely tested in the coming years, but Asquith always thought it a misfortune when they were broken.

## APPENDIX TO CHAPTER XVI

The following table shows the changes in offices and personnel between Campbell-Bannerman's Government and Asquith's first Government :

<i>Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's 1905-1908.</i>		<i>Mr. Asquith's 1908.</i>
Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman (Prime Minister).	First Lord of the Treasury	Mr. Asquith (Prime Minister)
Lord Loreburn.	Lord Chancellor	Lord Loreburn.
Earl of Crewe.	Lord President of Council	Lord Tweedmouth.
Marquess of Ripon	Lord Privy Seal	Marquess of Ripon.
Mr. Asquith.	Chancellor of Exchequer	Mr. Lloyd George.
Sir Edward Grey.	Foreign Secretary	Sir Edward Grey.
Earl of Elgin.	Colonial Secretary	Earl of Crewe.
Mr. John Morley.	Secretary for India	Viscount Morley of Blackburn (Mr. John Morley).
Mr. Herbert Gladstone.	Home Secretary	Mr. Herbert Gladstone.
Mr. Haldane.	Secretary for War	Mr. Haldane.
Lord Tweedmouth.	First Lord of Admiralty	Mr. McKenna.
Earl of Aberdeen.	Lord Lieutenant of Ireland	Earl of Aberdeen.
Lord Justice Walker.	Lord Chancellor of Ireland	Lord Justice Walker.
Mr. John Sinclair.	Secretary for Scotland	Mr. John Sinclair.
Sir Henry Fowler.	Chancellor of the Duchy	Viscount Wolverhampton (Sir Henry Fowler).
Mr. Lloyd George.	President Board of Trade	Mr. Churchill.
Mr. John Burns.	President Local Government Board	Mr. John Burns.
Earl Carrington.	President Board of Agriculture	Earl Carrington.
Mr. Augustine Birrell (1905-7).	President Board of Education	Mr. Runciman.
Mr. R. McKenna (1907)		
Mr. Lewis Harcourt.	First Commissioner of Works	Mr. Lewis Harcourt.
Mr. Bryce (1905-7).	Chief Secretary, Ireland	Mr. Birrell.
Mr. Birrell (1907).		
Mr. Sydney Buxton.	Postmaster-General	Mr. Sydney Buxton.
Mr. R. McKenna (1905-7).	Financial Secretary to Treasury	Mr. C. E. Hobhouse.
Mr. W. Runciman (1907).		



Mr. George Whiteley.	Patronage Secretary to Treasury	Mr. George Whiteley.
Mr. J. A. Pease.	Junior Lords of Treasury (3)	Mr. J. A. Pease.
Mr. Herbert Lewis.		Mr. Herbert Lewis.
Mr. F. Freeman-Thomas (1905-6).		Captain Cecil Norton.
Captain Cecil Norton (1906).		Mr. J. M. Whitley (unpaid).
Mr. J. M. Fuller (unpaid), (1906-7).		
Mr. J. M. Whitley (unpaid), (1907).		
Mr. R. K. Causton.	Paymaster-General	Mr. R. K. Causton.
Mr. George Lambert.	Civil Lord of Admiralty	Mr. George Lambert.
Mr. Edmund Robertson.	Secretary to the Admiralty	Dr. Macnamara.
Mr. Herbert Samuel.	Under Home Secretary	Mr. Herbert Samuel.
Lord Fitzmaurice.	Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs	Lord Fitzmaurice.
Mr. Churchill.	Under Colonial Secretary	Colonel Seely.
Earl of Portsmouth.	Under Secretary for War	Lord Lucas.
Mr. John E. Ellis (1905-6).	Under Secretary for India	Mr. T. R. Buchanan.
Mr. C. E. Hobhouse (1907).		
Mr. H. E. Kearley.	Secretary Board of Trade	Mr. H. E. Kearley.
Mr. W. Runciman (1905-7).	Secretary Local Government Board	Mr. C. F. G. Masterman.
Dr. T. J. Macnamara (1907).		
Mr. Thomas Lough.	Parl. Sec. Board of Education	Mr. McKinnon Wood.
Mr. T. R. Buchanan.	Financial Secretary, War Office	Mr. F. D. Acland.
Mr. T. W. Russell (1907).	Vice-President Irish Board of Agriculture	Mr. T. W. Russell.
Sir J. Lawson Walton (1905-8).	Attorney-General	Sir W. S. Robson.
Sir W. S. Robson (1908).		
Sir W. S. Robson (1905-8).	Solicitor-General	Sir S. T. Evans.
Sir S. T. Evans (1908)		
Mr. Thomas Shaw.	Lord Advocate	Mr. Thomas Shaw.
Mr. Alexander Ure.	Solicitor-General for Scotland	Mr. Alexander Ure.
Mr. R. R. Cherry.	Attorney-General for Ireland	Mr. R. R. Cherry.
Mr. Redmond Barry.	Solicitor-General for Ireland	Mr. Redmond Barry.
<i>Household Appointments.</i>		
Earl of Liverpool (1905-7).	Lord Steward	Earl Beauchamp.
Earl Beauchamp (1907).		

Viscount Althorp.	Lord Chamberlain (£2,000).	Viscount Althorp.
Earl of Sefton	} Master of the Horse	Earl of Granard.
(1905-7).		
Earl of Granard (1907).	Treasurer of the House-	Sir Edward Strachey.
Sir Edward Strachey.	hold	
The Master of Elibank.	Comptroller of the House-	The Master of Elibank.
	hold	
Mr. Wentworth Beau-	} Vice-Chamberlain	
mont 1905-7).		Mr. J. M. F. Fuller.
Mr. J. M. F. Fuller		
(1907).		

## CHAPTER XVII

### A PERSONAL CHAPTER

Asquith as a man—Intellect and character—Public estimate of his character at fault—His refusal to correct misunderstanding or misjudgment—Idiosyncrasies of conduct—Tenacity of habit—Physical toughness—Relaxations—Golf and Bridge—Methods with bores—Absorption in byways and oddities of literature—Relations with his family—Its atmosphere and personnel—Finances—Some impressions recalled. C. A.

THE last few chapters have been concerned with my father in his public life, but before going forward, it may be well to glance at some of his qualities as a man and to recall the picture of him as he appeared to his family and his intimates in those years when he was in the prime of life and the holder of the highest office in the State.

#### I

My father's distinction as a man lay in the union of an intellect and character, each not only extraordinary in texture, but marked by a certain grandeur of mould and scale. It was his intellect which first captured the public eye. Mind in its stronger and finer manifestations was in him something pervasive: bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh. Subtract intellect from some men, and there is little visible change: from others, and there remains a recognisable shell of personality. He without intellect, and even without his special type of intellect, would have been almost a contradiction in terms, as meaningless as a hunchback without his hunch, or a sandwich-man without his boards. Until middle life—indeed until he became Prime Minister in 1908, he was considered by all but his intimates as the embodiment of passionless reason, hard and clear as diamond: and it was to deaf ears that Lord Rosebery in the 'nineties proclaimed the qualities of his heart more remarkable even than those of his head. When he acceded to supreme office, some incident—his emotion it may be, at Campbell-Bannerman's death or his obituary speech on Alfred Lyttelton—declared him indisputably human, and later episodes confirmed and broadcast

this revelation. The public never quite recovered from its surprise. Proceeding to attribute to him with justice manifold virtues of the heart, it overswung itself, and ended with a conception as one-sided as that with which it had started ; a conception in which patience, loyalty, and magnanimity bulked so large as almost to overshadow the astonishing mental endowment which had until then monopolised its attention.

Yet then, as earlier, the mind was in large part the man ; and as to the quality of his intellectual equipment all instructed observers speak with a consentient voice. Gaps of course it had, and dumb notes. It was not artistically creative : it had no turn for ideology or system building : was fashioned not to see visions but to handle urgent practical questions : not to imagine, but to unravel, to weigh, to judge, to reason, to act. But the defects of its qualities serve to point the qualities themselves. It would be wearisome and otiose to cite the tributes which these last have drawn from the most diverse quarters during almost every phase of his career. Some have dwelt for preference on the speed of assimilation, the organising grasp which took in a rabble of fact and sent it forth an army : others on the richly stored and faultlessly accurate memory, or the instinctive mastery of the perfectly placed and chosen word : others again on the weight and precision of argumentation, or the mobility with which the mind's whole muster could be concentrated almost in an instant and deployed in any direction. When every discount has been made, the intellect which wielded with such easy command this varied panoply was a thing of majestic power : within the limitations of its type, and for the purpose to which it was mainly dedicated, as nearly perfect as may well be.

During the last decade of his life his mind was rarely " extended " : there is a visible slackening not so much of its fibre, as of the will to use it, accounted for in part by the shocks and jars of eight years of supreme office in circumstances of unexampled strain, and in part by the numbing blow inflicted by the death of his eldest son in 1916. But during the period already surveyed and most of the long years of his Premiership, his faculties were at their height and carried him on effortless wings over one obstacle after another, displaying in their course ever fresh reserves of power with every call made on them by an interminable crescendo of alarums and crises.

His true character was obscured for a long time, to all but friends and colleagues, by an extreme emotional reserve. The public indeed in the end clothed him generously with certain attributes which he unquestionably possessed : largeness of nature, chivalry,

and honourable scruple, the loyalty that takes nothing and gives with both hands. But beneath these garments he remained to them to the end something of an abstraction. Only those who were in close contact saw the individual who wore them ; they alone could estimate the shyness, the sensitiveness, the delicacy, the emotional warmth and generosity of his temperament : qualities which found expression less in words than in countless unadvertised acts of kindness, of sympathy, of consideration, and of forbearance. He inspired in those who knew him a devotion which was limited only by the measure of their knowledge, rising in those who knew him best to the intensity of a passion. That more did not know him as he was, was in part due to his own nature. A certain quality blent of shyness, pride, and even arrogance veiled him from the public gaze. He had to commend himself to the world on his own terms or none : for the right reasons or not at all. He would not descend to explanations or edit or dramatize himself for popular consumption. When a voice at a meeting cried : " That was when you murdered the miners at Featherstone in 1892," his only retort was to correct the date. When crowds cheered him in the streets during the early days of the War he hurried by with averted face, pretending even to himself that he was not the object of the demonstration. When in 1915 certain newspapers, inspired by Lord French, reviled him for misleading the public about the deficiency of shells, he did not produce Lord Kitchener's letter which contained his vindication until years after the event, and then only in defence of Lord Kitchener's memory. Again, in 1918, when the Pemberton Billing trial added its quota of mud to the spate of obloquy which eddied round his name, the most it could draw from him was a single contemptuous sentence about persons of " low intelligence and high credulity." The same quality finds expression in his curious combination of ambition with a complete absence of " push." He desired supreme office, but beyond doing every job that came his way as well as possible, he never fought for it. To thrust, or lobby, or intrigue, or conciliate powerful enemies whom he did not respect would have been to abjure his own nature. For a position gained or retained on these terms he had no use : advancement, high office must fall to him by consent, or he would have none of them. " I never wrestle with a chimney sweep," says a figure in Boswell's *Johnson* ; and though my father minded far more than was imagined the misjudgment and disloyalty which he endured with such outward composure, he would have minded still more the squalor of stooping to the level of some of his noisier critics and of

talking to them in the only language they could understand. The same fastidiousness lay behind his obstinate appeals to reason, and refusal or incapacity to address himself to sentiment or prejudice, notwithstanding every proof of their hold over the mass of human beings.

His shrinking from the limelight even of posthumous publicity appears further in his refusal of a public funeral, and in his reluctance to have his life written. He went, indeed, so far as to declare that he would do his best to make any biography impossible, and it took all the diplomacy of Mr. Spender—than whom he had no more valued personal friend or closer political confidant—to reconcile him to the inevitable. “If it must be,” he said, “I would sooner be in your hands than in any.” But by this time he had destroyed much valuable material and seriously embarrassed the task of his biographers.

## II

In his private life he displayed in an unusual degree those idiosyncrasies, or—to borrow a term from the eighteenth-century vocabulary he loved—those “*nodosities*” of habit and conduct which mark their owner as a “character.” Not that he was in the least eccentric or remote from the human norm. His intellectual range and curiosity furnished in abundance points of contact with all types. With scholars and business men, with ecclesiastics and soldiers, with racing men, heralds, and experts in chess, he could discuss their specialities on level terms, often exposing joints in their armour and filling gaps in their knowledge while continually replenishing his own. But of the neutrality of tint which makes so many men a mere replica of their surroundings, he had no trace. Thus he never concealed from doctors his disbelief in the value of their art, or missed an opportunity in their company of emphasising his contempt for the therapeutic pretensions of exercise and fresh air. With dog lovers he fearlessly paraded his indifference to the dumb creation, and musicians were never left in doubt that he considered their performances a compound of noise and nuisance, which was only tolerable if not too loud.<sup>1</sup> In all companies he was himself, and all that he did and said bore his signature: was as unborrowed, as

<sup>1</sup> He was on one occasion induced to sit through the whole of *Gotterdammerung*. The only feature of the performance which excited his admiration or even his interest was the spirited behaviour of the horse “Grane,” which, “More fortunate,” as he said, “than myself,” escaped from the Opera House before the second act, and was only recaptured from a hiding-place off the Strand just in time to participate in the third. The experience left his estimate of animal intelligence improved, but his opinion of music unchanged.

impossible to mistake for the work of others as his handwriting or any paragraph taken at random from one of his speeches.

In the minutiae of daily routine he was not only individual but highly conservative. For the greater part of his life for instance he invariably read, for about two hours before going to bed, some book as a rule unconnected with his work. No public or private exactions were allowed to interfere with this iron habit, and on one occasion when he returned at four in the morning from a fancy-dress ball he was found by an anxious wife in his library at a quarter to six, still clad in the costume of one of Cromwell's Ironsides and absorbed in his usual lucubration. With similar tenacity he clung to quill pens long after all reasonable men had discarded them. Induced at last to buy a stylograph—a repulsive red example of its kind, of Doric build and poor efficiency—he continued with dogged loyalty to ply it alone in a world of fountain pens. Except occasionally in the matter of notes for speeches,<sup>1</sup> nothing could reconcile him to the practice of dictation, to which he imputed most of the diffuseness of modern correspondence. The great Victorians had written their letters with their own hands. Why should not he? The Victorians' practice did not save them from prolixity, but this is not a fault of which his own letters can be accused. For the telephone he felt almost a personal animosity, and a few gruff monosyllables—mostly "Yes" and "No"—were all his resentment conceded to it. Hospitable to new ideas in larger fields, he obstinately resisted changes in the minor apparatus of living. In this sphere the new was to him new-fangled and alien. He had a habit, both in public and in private, of referring to anything he disliked with a peculiar distinctness and a kind of intimidating emphasis, which seemed to set, between the speaker and the thing spoken of, an unbridgeable chasm of incomprehension and distaste. The tone of voice in which at one time he used to allude to the Referendum, would have blasted a more popular reform; and many proposed innovations in his routine of life withered before the same chilling inflexion.

Physically, his constitution was, in his own words, equally compounded of iron and leather. He could stand more in the way of exacting mental labour, late hours, and airless surroundings than any public man, and was unsparing in his contempt for the "pampered athletes" who succumb to such conditions. Until the

<sup>1</sup> Until he had been Prime Minister for some time his notes were extremely meagre. In 1908, on the occasion of a speech of importance on the Licensing Bill of that year, a lady sitting on the platform asked him for his notes as a memento. On the single envelope which he handed her the only legible words were "Too many pubs."

last few years of his life he had no idea whether a room was hot or cold, and to the last it was a matter of indifference to him whether he inhaled cigar smoke or oxygen. Some time in his sixties, he had, much to his disgust, to visit a dentist. Asked when he had last done so, he replied on one occasion only, thirty-seven years previously, and then only because he had broken a tooth. Until he was over seventy he never had afternoon tea, and then very seldom. During his first twelve or fifteen years as a barrister he even abstained, during the legal term, from lunch. In his early days in the House he worked colossally : and would often toil up to Hampstead when the sun was rising after a late sitting in the House, with the knowledge that he had to be in the Temple at nine. In later life this strenuous but effortless asceticism was relaxed, and he could certainly not be reckoned, except when necessity called, an early riser.

It was possibly owing to these exactions that until the age of about forty his frame was spare and his face pale, contrasting with the full habit of body and hale complexion with which the public later became familiar. But though constitutionally herculean, and physically not inactive (in his early days he walked strenuously in the Lake country and even rode a cob) he was the reverse of athletic, and the deliberation of his movements verged on clumsiness. A story which found currency at one time that he had constructed a bicycle with his own hands, and had even been seen "scorching" on it down the Mall, seems to have owed its origin to nothing but its extreme unplausibility. But Margot's characteristic comment—"Henry, who can't even strike a match" erred in the opposite direction, for he played a very fair game of billiards, and his performance on the putting green with an archaic piriform wooden putter were marked by a deadly accuracy. No man ever saw him run, and when, on one occasion, he was urged in vain to the double in order to catch a train, his defence "I don't run much" was considered by the best judges to involve an economy of truth. But when necessity arose he launched out on a swift glide whose unpretentious and deceptive velocity (though both feet were never simultaneously off the ground) was adequate to all practical purposes. Only twice did he discharge a fire-arm—in 1894—and in both cases hit his mark, each shot killing a stag. And when on a pinnacle during the War, he was invited by Lord Jellicoe to fire a rifle at a buoy, on which the Admiral had drawn a bead in vain, he laughingly declined to imperil a shooting average which he justly claimed was unsurpassable.

Nothing pleased him more than this sort of unexpected minor



triumph in an alien field. These were often rendered possible by the agglutinative quality of his mind, to which facts, even of a kind which bored him, stuck like burrs. It was said by William James of a very learned Englishman that to him all facts alike were born free and equal. My father's omniscience was not of this hospitable order; it was the reluctant omniscience of one who could not forget. Thus although more than indifferent to music, he could without effort or inaccuracy enumerate the most obscure works of the most insignificant composers, and name the year in which each was given to the world. Nothing interested him less than horses, but by some inscrutable trick of unconscious assimilation he became a walking encyclopædia of pedigree and form. Margot shortly after their marriage introduced him to a number of her hunting and racing friends. A controversy having arisen as to what horse won the Derby in a particular year, he not only challenged successfully the statement of an expert on this point, but undertook to name the horse which had won the Derby in any year, along with its sire and dam, and made good his undertaking.<sup>1</sup> Much later, in 1920, finding himself a member of a house party of turf experts who were trying to forecast the result of the Derby, he declared that on pedigree Spion Kop should win, and win it did. This having become known he was much amused at receiving sheaves of letters imploring him for tips in connection with the forthcoming Royal Hunt Cup and the St. Leger.

<sup>1</sup> Margot's account of this incident is as follows :

"In the winter of 1894 a riding friend of mine—Buck Barclay—gave a dinner for us to which he invited all my sporting and his racing friends. After a little tentative conversation on the topics of the day, Mr. Arthur Coventry mentioned the date of an early Derby winner and its dam and sire; at which my husband said, 'I hesitate to contradict you, but that is not the date of the horse you mention; nor do I think he was bred like that.' Everyone was surprised, and one of the company said, 'Are you fond of racing, Mr. Asquith?' 'I've never seen a race in my life, but I believe I could tell you the name and date of every Derby winner,' he replied. Arthur Coventry and the others begged him to do it, and went to fetch the racing calendar to see if such a thing were possible, and to verify his own statement. Our host chafed him and said as he was leaving the room, 'Will you have a bet?—Now's your chance, Arthur! I bet you a pony that you're wrong,' and turning to me he said, 'And I'll bet you a tanner, Margot, that Mr. Asquith can't tell us all the Derby winners!' 'Right,' said I, 'I'll give you double that, Buck, if Henry is wrong.' The book was opened and in awed silence Henry told the name and date of every Derby winner correctly. This delighted the company, and one of them said, 'Fill up your glasses, boys, and let's drink the health of Mr. and Mrs. Asquith!' They stood up and drained their glasses. When we had resumed our seats Minor Lawson (a brother of Lord Burnham) said, 'You must have an amazing memory, Mr. Asquith'; at which Henry replied modestly, 'I would hardly say that, but I've got a good memory for insignificant things.'

"As the racing calendar was the Bible, and the Derby Paradise to half the company, this was less well received! But the evening had been a great success, and some of my friends whispered as I said good night to them, 'He's a fine chap, and you're damned lucky!'"

Into games he entered with zest, but without pretension. While he enjoyed some which depend, like chess, on pure skill, and some which depend on pure chance, he felt less relish for those in which skill and chance are wedded, and his inclination was to reduce them to an entirely speculative footing. His bridge, for instance, was a shameless, if heroic, gamble with destiny. No one who has witnessed it will forget the relentless incaution of his bidding, which he would force up to any level needed to ensure his playing the hand. If the result was favourable he would acclaim it as the reward of serpentine strategy : if, as often happened, it was adverse, his partner was left to draw what consolation he could from the standard formula, " We had to do it : they would have gone out." Margot, whose bridge was serious, found protest unavailing and ultimately, to the great relief of both, he was exiled to a " bad " table where, sitting happily below the salt, in an atmosphere of low stakes and general levity, he could indulge his peculiar bent without qualm or scruple ; though in truth little of either had been apparent before.

Golf was perhaps his favourite pastime. On the links his prowess with the putter could not always compensate for an indifferent game through the green, though here want of length was within limits eked out by guile. Thus while he frequently failed to carry the hazard designed to catch a short player's tee shot, his groundling drive would as often as not pick its way with pawky delicacy across the narrow isthmus of land connecting two bunkers. These little necks of land he called *cols du coup manqué*, and was believed deliberately to aim at as an insurance against the worst. Sometimes the plan miscarried by inches : in less favourable cases the ball made a bee line for the bunker and lodged there. His comment in both cases was the same : " Just caught." His style and swing were characteristically his own, and could be recognised a quarter of a mile off. There was no mistaking the slow measured oscillation from foot to foot, settling gradually down into a ponderous equipoise : the succeeding second or two of concentration and suspended movement, terminated by a tremor of the left knee ; the lurch of the head as it bowed over the final swoop of the club before straightening to contemplate the result. He preferred an unhurried round which left time for conversational interchanges between strokes : and given an opponent familiar with the classics, he enjoyed few things more than to bandy and cap Latin quotations germane to the varying fortunes of the game. It was on the golf course, too, that he was wont to hatch Latin versions of the latest mot or indiscretion of a Cabinet colleague. One of these recur to memory, emitted at

Cruden Bay, shortly after the Colonial Conference at which Mr. Churchill "banged, barred, and bolted" the door against Colonial Preference. "*Ausi sumus non solum ocludere ostium, sed ocluso pessulos etiam et repagula obdere*"—an adaptation from a phrase in Terence.

Pleasure and relaxation he loved, and brought to them a boyish unspoilt keenness which eludes their professional pursuers. Month after month and year after year his faculties throughout the working day were kept at something like their full stretch, driving Roman roads through a political jungle, weighing words in scrupulous scales, building bridges between irreconcilable colleagues, arriving painfully at healing formulæ. It is entirely intelligible that after perhaps ten hours of this process in a day the instincts which it had inhibited should rebound like a spring from which weights have been removed, and find a vent, as they did, in irresponsible gaiety and occasionally in whimsical extravagance of language.

This is the explanation of the outbursts of rollicking exaggeration, of the unbridled, sweeping judgments, which he would often indulge in private, to the surprise of those who were more familiar with the balanced pronouncements of the public man. The fact was that it cost him more effort than anyone guessed, more perhaps than he himself knew, to repress the sense of fun, the keen perception of other people's limitations, the boredom and the irritation which it is not the least important of a Prime Minister's functions to withhold from the public eye. After the day's work was over, he would open the sluice gates against which this complex of feelings had piled up, and let them flow forth in a roaring spate of unmeasured language, often condemnatory, often merely frolicsome, but almost always extreme. In this spirit was a remark he let fall when Henry James, during the War, became a naturalised Englishman. He was delighted to become one of the sponsors who had formally to vouch for the eligibility to British citizenship of this distinguished American and personal friend, but added that "the bonds of friendship were strained to cracking when I had to subscribe to the proposition that he could both talk and write English." Such playful extravagances of expression were conscious and deliberate and served the purposes of a safety-valve. No one who knew him would have dreamed of taking them at their face value: but they reflected with much humorous distortion part of his real opinions, and even with every discount made, would have astounded some of the persons to whom they related.

The same revulsion from the solemnity and restraint of his official



H. H. A.  
Penrhôs, Anglesey  
*(From a snapshot)*



round finds expression in his correspondence. His letters to men are few, and disappointingly concise and practical: with women, whether in conversation or on paper, he was always more at his ease, and the correspondents to whom he wrote letters for the sake of letter writing were invariably feminine. From Margot he was too seldom separated after marriage to write to her regularly, and to her, and to his children he disburdened himself in talk; but he discovered a need for some receptive and sympathetic female intelligence, outside the circle of his family, to which he could communicate as a matter of routine the spontaneous overflow of thought, or humour, of fancy or of emotion. A whole succession of women friends responded to this need—Venetia Stanley<sup>1</sup> and latterly Mrs. Harrisson may be cited as examples, and his letters<sup>2</sup> to them furnish some equivalent for the diaries which he had kept spasmodically in the 1890's and discontinued later. The same hyperbolical language, the same license of dispraise and more rarely of eulogy as have been noticed above mingle in these communications with flights of playful imagination and a mass of literary gossip.

He has been described by ill-informed people as an indolent man. Only the extreme rapidity and ease with which his mind worked can excuse such a misconception. His life, especially during the nine years of his premiership, was one of intellectual exertion prodigious in its sustained severity, and its nature both explains and justifies his determination that what little leisure it allowed should be unmixed. In these short hours of distraction he could, and did, throw aside the cares of State with an uncompromising gesture; cleaned his mental slate of politics, eschewed argument, avoided serious topics, and declined in any shape or form to talk "shop." This was his instinctive method of recharging his batteries of vital energy after the drain of the day's work. Accordingly those who expected from him during this close season either weighty pronouncements or conversational fireworks, often left him undazzled and even unilluminated. "I must say," said Henry James after a week-end with him at Walmer Castle, "the Prime Minister practises a rigid intellectual economy." The novelist, whose own play of mind was so unflagging, was perhaps unduly insistent in his demands for continuous cerebration in others, but the lengths to which my father pushed his repugnance to mental exertion in certain moments of his conversational leisure surprised less exigent observers.

<sup>1</sup> The Hon. Mrs. Edwin Montagu.

<sup>2</sup> The "*aides-mémoire*" and "contemporary notes" quoted from some of his published works consist largely of these and similar letters.

(1867) edition, the lines do not appear : in Mr. Spender's, which was an edition of 1870 or later, they do. It seems that Tennyson felt he had stressed too strongly the barren qualities of the yew in Section 2 of *In Memoriam*, implying even that it did not flower ; and had inserted the additional stanzas (Section 39) from which Mr. Spender quoted by way of making amends to the tree he had slighted and of rehabilitating himself as a naturalist.

Entirely familiar with the main currents of literature and history, he was especially attracted by their remoter pools and eddies. From these he collected an extraordinary farrago of quaint scraps of information, whimsical dicta and other literary driftwood, recording the results of his research on slips of paper or in the margins or blank pages of books. A note-book which he seems to have kept when an undergraduate (it is dated 1871) contains not a few of these. Sandwiched there between a summary of Goethe's theory of colour and a mass of comparative statistics about Belgian, Swiss, and German agriculture (heaven knows why he wished to remember the number of horned cattle in the Canton of Vaud), is a note to the effect that Prynne, the Caroline satirist whose ears were cut off in 1637, had had them cut off some years previously and sewn on again. From this one passes to a remark of Joseph de Maistre to Madame de Stael about the English Church : " Eh bien, oui madame, je conviendrai qu'elle est parmi les Eglises protestantes ce qu'est l'orang-outang parmi les singes." The minor problems of literature fascinated him. They were the theme of innumerable questions which he posed to his family and which they sometimes disappointed him by answering correctly. Many readers of *Hamlet* know, or think they know, why on the death of the old King the crown did not automatically devolve on the Prince, but went, apparently without a *coup d'état*, to his uncle. But how many readers of *Pride and Prejudice* can lay their hands on the meagre clues which the book affords to the Christian name of Mr. Darcy ? Where does Jane Austen mention baseball ? Is there any foundation for the theory that Henry VIII's main reason for executing Anne Boleyn was her habit of eating biscuits in bed ? How many equestrian statues are there in the world ? What was the name, date, and nationality of the respective inventors of (a) foie gras ; (b) acrostics ? What, precisely, is the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception ? (It was surprising how many runners fell at this fence.) He would expend tireless pains in exposing a misquotation or tracking a correct one to some unsuspected lair. In one instance at least he succeeded in killing both birds with one stone. Few people know that the familiar

"tag," "Tempora mutantur: nos et mutamur in illis," originally read "Omnia mutantur," and is the product, not of the classical Muse, but of a seventeenth century writer called Borbonius. He was delighted to find that even the triple brass of his friend Professor Gilbert Murray's scholarship disclosed here a joint. Does anyone know who coined the phrase, "Quem deus vult perdere, prius dementat?" This he himself could never discover. It is certainly not classical.

He devoted a good deal of research to the genesis of political catchwords. The origin of "three acres and a cow" is traced, unexpectedly, to Mill's *Political Economy*. What is the pedigree of the expression, "bag and baggage"? With the help of his friend Mr. Desmond McCarthy he embarked on an eager quest for "bag and baggagers" before Gladstone, and was rewarded by the discovery that Oliver Cromwell employed the phrase to William Lenthall, Speaker, on 25th October, 1649. Further research revealed its use in *As You Like It*. Did Disraeli coin the expression "Peace with honour?" No, it occurs as far back as in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, and even in a political connection was used by Lord John Russell years before the Treaty of Berlin. "Ploughing the sands"—a phrase popularised by my father and often attributed to him—is, as he often insisted, at least as old as Ovid and Juvenal. A comprehensive list of political catchwords or "slogans" (to use a word he detested) with their true provenance will be found at the end of his book, *Fifty Years of Parliament*.

But while curiosities and byways of literature made this special appeal to him, he was always refreshing his acquaintance with its broad arterial roads. Dyed fast though his mind was in the classical vat, saturation never begot satiety, and he could say truthfully of the masterpieces of the ancients "pernoctant nobiscum; perigrinantur; rusticantur." So also with the English classics. Seven Waverley novels in a year was no unusual bag for him. In the last few years of his life he re-read almost the whole works of Scott and of Dickens. The catholicity of his appetite for books is a little unexpected in one so fastidious. The life of Dr. Chalmers, in four volumes, was not too heavy for him, nor a magazine story by Mr. P. G. Wodehouse<sup>1</sup> too light, and he was a large consumer of detective novels. But modern sex-ridden fiction found him

<sup>1</sup> On an occasion in 1925, finding him alone and absorbed in the study of a magazine, my wife Anne asked him what he was reading. H. H. A. (with a shade of embarrassment), "As a matter of fact, it's a story called *Archie and the Sausage-chappie*." Then, simply, "It's very good: it's by P. G. Wodehouse." It appeared later that he had unobtrusively consumed almost the entire output of this author.



squeamish and left him weary. "The same old thing," he would say, with a contemptuous sniff, "a triangle in a hothouse."

### III

His relations with his family were so much of the essence of him that some allusion to its atmosphere and personnel can hardly be avoided.

Its ethos was in some ways unusual. Between its members (or many of them, for this does not apply to the females or to his second family) there was an unwritten taboo against emotional demonstrativeness even of the mildest order, and the ordinary exchanges of family life were often overlaid with a veneer of detachment which might even be mistaken for dislike. Between Raymond in particular (whose reserve was sometimes misread as inhumanity) and his brothers, so harmless an act as that of shaking hands was successfully evaded for years at a stretch for fear the gesture might be construed as evidence of more mutual regard than they cared to own to in public. Indeed, a more or less rigid etiquette of mutual indifference, or even invective established itself between him and them, and in some degree between them and each other, any departure from which would have embarrassed them and incurred resentment as a breach of the canons of good taste, or at least of the common incivilities due from one Asquith to another. Raymond's first comment at the age of two, on hearing of the birth of his brother Herbert was, "Can Bertie think?" And he spent much time in later life in elaborating the grounds of this early scepticism. News that the writer of these lines had been fortunate enough, like his father and himself, to gain the first Balliol scholarship, drew from Raymond the genuinely amazed query: "Who was second?" and was moreover the occasion of the first and only letter I received from him. It was as follows:

DEAR CYRIL,

Fancy *you* being as clever as—

Raymond!

This communication, unsullied by any mawkish effusion, left the austerity of our relations intact. Nor is it easy to forget the expression of nausea with which, having risen courteously in an ill-lit room to welcome what he supposed to be a stranger, he discovered that he had been unwittingly polite to his brother Arthur. Notwithstanding their cool and casual contacts, the family as a whole were united by a powerful freemasonry, and its members would even on

occasion furtively fight each other's battles : but a horror of emotional nudism led them to clothe their mutual appreciation with a semblance of judicial indifference, and to deny it all ordinary expression.

It is uncertain whether the head of the family communicated this spirit to his offspring or absorbed it from them ; but he often exhibited a seeming aloofness hardly less marked, an almost startling neutrality in matters in which it would have been human to expect some friendly bias. Thus he was often heard to defend a family with which he had close ties from the suggestion of Semitic ancestry by asserting that they more probably had black blood. And " You won't find a greater liar than X " (someone near and dear to him) was uttered in a tone of affectionate musing admiration, or even with the air of one claiming an honourable distinction for a candidate from whom it had been unfairly withheld. Such claims as this were often pressed in the embarrassed presence of their beneficiary, who sat by, eyeing with some distaste the sordid laurels with which this strange champion was at such pains to crown him.

Very ordinary transactions were inclined to make him unreasonably shy. The act for instance of giving money to his children, was performed with a painfully guilty expression of countenance and an averted eye, and often followed by a hurried flight from the room. But though he suffered from an intense emotional pudeur, and anything like gush froze him into an embarrassed curtness, the ramparts of his reserve were by no means impregnable. He himself would perhaps have wished them lower and was sometimes glad to find his defences forced or circumvented. To women especially, he let down the drawbridge, and allowed " a timely utterance " to give the repressed instincts of a fundamentally emotional nature relief. Margot, Violet, and the youngest members of the family in their separate ways ministered to this side of him. But he was never left in doubt about the feeling, whether articulate or masked by an off-hand manner or muted by *gêne*, which his family entertained for him or the place he occupied in their hearts. One and all they felt for him a love and admiration which knew neither limit nor qualification, and was reserved, in its special quality and degree, for him and for him alone. Any slight to him blew their judicial airs to the winds, and it did not need the persistent, and in some respects, infamous detraction which he suffered in his later years to rally them behind him in a ferocious unanimity of resentment and counter-attack. He, with the gesture of Cæsar when attacked by Brutus, might scorn self-defence and wrap himself in an impenetrable disdain.

Such quixotry exasperated them and they found deep satisfaction in the withering and finely articulate onslaught with which his daughter Violet fell upon his enemies at Paisley and said for him some of the things he could never be induced to say for himself.

He, on his side, where his family were concerned, was a confirmed and unblushing partisan. His enthusiasm for Margot's Autobiography (which did not need the excuse of partisanship) knew no bounds, and was attested by the thoroughness with which he scoured the reviews for favourable comment and the resounding anathemas which he heaped on those who thought they had detected blemishes in the *magnum opus*.

The place which Margot filled in his life has already been touched on, and no one who has read her books or his letters needs any enlightenment as to its sovereign character. The "higher unity," in Hegelian phrase, which subsumed natures so disparate was paradoxical, but solid, potent and enduring. His foursquare, massive physique, suggesting the rock of Gibraltar, contrasted no less sharply with her tenuous frame and darting, dragon-fly movement, than did the quality and method of their two minds. He hewed his way with clean laborious strokes to the heart of a problem; she abjured logic and attained truth—or error—with a single hawk-like swoop of divination. As with the hawk, the result was hit or miss, seldom anything between the two; but her percentage of hits was a standing grievance to those who dismiss feminine intuition as an exploded myth. While accuracy was an iron law of his nature, candour and a truthful intention was more characteristic of hers than a pedestrian exactitude in matters of fact. But the relish which he derived from her account of an episode or a transaction was often directly proportioned to its freedom from the cramping touch of history. On one occasion she had to give evidence in a fashionable action at law, and Raymond was sent to the court to watch and report on what proved a finished performance. "Well, Raymond," was the conjugal query when he returned, "did Margot get through with a reasonable allowance of perjury?" And the tone of the question suggested that he hoped she had not denied wings to her fancy. He revelled, as did all the family, in her unique gift of verbal caricature, which seized on the essentials of a face, a situation, or a character, and expressed them with an inspired economy of strokes. Readers of her writings will need example neither of this gift nor of other traits which have made her as famous as her husband: of her consuming zest for drama and excitement which does not shrink from the limelight and demanded for her

husband perhaps more of its rays than he desired : of her vivid reckless candour of utterance : of the strong sense of material values queerly shot with mysticism and a kind of clairvoyance : of the impatient generosity to which no lame dog could appeal without instant response : and not least of the single-minded devotion to her husband's interests as she conceived them. She loved his friends, hated his enemies, fought his battles, savoured his triumphs, and felt his reverses, as though they were more than her own.

His daughter Violet was the only woman of his family who in his declared judgment possessed a first-rate masculine mind of the same order as Raymond's. To a freakishly developed gift of expression, and a verbal memory, hardly inferior to her father's, she adds perhaps the most devastating powers of ridicule of which her acquaintance have any experience. A being of tenacious and protective loyalties, and a born partisan, she is always prepared to mobilise these formidable gifts in defence of her friends, to whom they are worth many battalions ; and the vilification which her father endured supplied, at the Paisley by-election in 1919, a perfect occasion for their exercise. The dialectical prowess she there displayed came as no surprise to her family who had witnessed its quality, often to their cost, in the domestic arena ; and its enlistment in this unexceptionable cause was balm to many an honourable scar. Her active political campaigning set the seal on the delight which her father at all times felt in her companionship. She possessed the knack of recounting to him an incident in the precise form in which it would make the most intimate and telling appeal to his sense of humour. The story was built up from innocent foundations into an elaborate pagoda of farce by the succession of deft strokes, whose cumulative artistry often left him with shoulders hunched and quaking, almost shamefaced with the excess of his amusement. But she possessed also, where he was concerned, the gift of communicative silence ; whereby two persons, who know each other beyond the need of speech, each absorb as it were through their pores the unspoken confidences and even the unformulated thoughts of the other.

The children of his second family suffered from fewer inhibitions than those of his first, and grasped firmly by the leaf the nettle of their father's reserve. Elizabeth, a child of formidable precocity and uncertain temper, mellowed later into an inexhaustible fountain of humour, generosity, and good nature. He took great pride in the many-sided efficiency which enabled her to throw off with such astonishing ease, novels, plays, and poems marked by an implacable cleverness, to play a faultless hand of bridge while conducting three

conversations in as many languages, and to intervene in as many others with a relevance which showed she had missed no word of them. Her brother Anthony was sufficiently his father's son to win a Balliol Scholarship, and sufficiently his mother's to display perhaps alone of the family a streak of creative imagination; but other qualities are entirely his own. "I have never known," wrote his father in 1925, "nor ever shall know, a character more perfect than his."

Of his sons by his first marriage, something is said in a later chapter.

While always ready with counsel and encouragement, and willing to give any amount of time to their most trivial concerns, he never sought to influence or control his children in matters large or small. The claim to superior wisdom implied in volunteering advice was one that repelled him: and as a parent he may be said to have belonged to the Manchester school. The same policy of *laissez-faire* pervaded his finances. In his earlier years there is visible a distinct vein of thrift and foresight qualified by a wise adventurousness in big decisions: but during the greater part of his life he was in money matters generous and unworldly to the point of improvidence. But if his finances were haphazard and marked by a sort of fatalism, he was personally frugal, seldom buying for himself anything more expensive than a detective novel from a bookstall, or demanding anything in the way of comfort beyond a plate of cold beef. Unquestionably politics impoverished him. If he had stuck to the Bar as a whole timer, he might have amassed a very comfortable fortune. The prospect of Office in December 1905 caused him to return a brief of ten thousand guineas, and politics thenceforward claimed him to the exclusion of the profession by which he earned his bread. Tales of a large fortune invested in Krupps were among the more fantastic legends circulated during the War. The answer, if one is still needed, to such suggestions is that we see him at the age of over seventy, writing books against time to make both ends meet: that he died poor, and that he would have died poorer still if generous friends—not all of one political party—had not in the last year of his life collected a sufficient fund to spare him the continued exertions of a literary conscript.

#### IV

Of most people after their death it is possible to recall some pose or setting in which they appear most completely themselves. Two

images among many recur to memory in connection with the subject of this book. He is seen, round about 1907 working at his writing-desk in the library of 20 Cavendish Square. Mahogany doors gleam darkly beyond the circle illuminated by his reading-lamp. Two tall red leather chairs stand before a fire of ship's timbers whose red glow and lazy blue flames are mildly reflected by steel fire-dogs. Books, half seen, line the walls, a small company, but all read, remembered, and their contents marshalled in the massive head of the figure at the writing-table. An aura of pipe and pouch hangs in the air, and the silence is only broken by the click of the logs and the scratch of a quill. The cool, solid Georgian dignity of the room reflects faithfully the character, the contained activity and unflurried absorption of its occupant.

Or again, reaching forward some years, one recreates him in imagination sitting at the head of a long table of guests at Archerfield or at Walmer. The clash and din of talk, in which the deep resonance of his voice joins from time to time, washes around and yet somehow below him. He seems to survey it from an eminence, above the reach of care or the impulse of competition : invulnerable and serene, yet critical and appraising : and there radiates from him an indescribable glow, an almost visible effluence of well-being, of geniality, of tolerance, or appreciation, of amusement, and of goodwill.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### AN ARDUOUS SESSION

Hopes and fears—The Party meeting—The Licensing Bill and its reception—King Edward's advice to Lord Lansdowne—The Bill rejected in the House of Lords—Asquith's third Budget—Inception of Old Age Pensions—The Education Question again—The two Bills—Asquith's efforts for peace and their failure—The Eucharistic Congress and Lord Ripon's resignation—The salvage of the Session—A gloomy outlook—Asquith's success as Leader. J. A. S.

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WHEN Mr. Morley said of Asquith's appointment as Prime Minister that there could be no thought of anything else, he expressed the universal opinion in the Liberal Party and in the country. Asquith never strove for any prize ; his prizes fell to him by general consent, and for the highest as for all others he was without rivals or competitors. From the time that Campbell-Bannerman seemed likely to pass from the scene, no other name was mentioned or dreamt of. But though his inevitableness was thus recognised, there were misgivings which were by no means confined to the jealous or the hostile. In the previous two years Campbell-Bannerman had had a great and unexpected parliamentary success, and not a few believed that he alone held the secret of preserving the unity of the vast and unwieldy party with its diverse sections and shades of opinions which supported the Government in the House of Commons. Even before Campbell-Bannerman's departure the pendulum had begun to swing back in the country, and Asquith, with his colder temperament and more academic ways, was thought to be the last man to check it or give it the reverse impulse. There was also some murmuring among the radicals at what they thought to be the change in the balance of the Government. With Campbell-Bannerman on top, they had taken for granted that the tendencies which they most disliked in Foreign and Imperial affairs would be held in check, but with Asquith as Prime Minister, Grey as Foreign Secretary, and Haldane at the War Office, the Liberal Imperialists seemed to have come into their Kingdom, and a revival of the old disputes about foreign policy was gloomily predicted. In April 1908 many were heard to sympathise with the

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new Prime Minister for the bad luck which had brought him to the highest place at the untimely moment when reaction from the unprecedented triumph of 1906 was certain and inevitable, and when schisms and differences were only too likely to go hand in hand with declining fortunes. Scarcely anyone at that moment would have thought it possible that he would hold his office continuously and without serious challenge for nearly nine years.

It was in those days part of the ritual of succession to the highest office that the new leader should present himself as soon as possible to his supporters in Parliament and receive a vote of confidence at their hands. This ceremony was duly performed at the Reform Club on 30th April, when Asquith made his first speech as Prime Minister and leader of the party. He spoke briefly and modestly, first paying tribute to his predecessor, then in a few sentences touching on the chief questions of the hour, Free Trade, Education, the Licensing Bill, Old Age Pensions. Speaking even better than he knew, he said :

“ There is a lot of country still to traverse, steep hills to climb, stiff fences to take, deep and even turbulent streams to cross before we come to the end of our journey, but we know where we are going, and we shall not lose our way.”

In a closing passage he defined his own political faith :

“ I do not come here to preach a new gospel. The old gospel is good enough for me, and I believe for you also. I have been a Liberal all my life—from the very first time that I could ever think about politics—and a Liberal I mean to remain to the end. *I* am a Liberal and *you* are Liberals, I believe for the same reason. Why ? Because we find in Liberal aims a true ideal, and in the Liberal Party the most potent instrument both for maintaining all that is good and fruitful in what we have inherited from the past, and what is a still more important matter, in securing for our people, for all classes of our people, a wider outlook, a more even level of opportunity, and for each and for all a richer and a fuller corporate life.”

The resolution proposed on this occasion gave him special pleasure, for it was drawn up by Mr. John Morley, and bears the impress of his style :

“ That this meeting of representatives of the Liberal Party in Parliament and the country most warmly welcomes the Right Hon. H. H. Asquith on his accession to the high post of First Minister to the Crown ; expresses its ardent confidence that his strong sense in council, power in debate and consummate mastery of all the habit and practice of public business are destined to carry triumphantly forward the good causes to which the Liberal Party is committed, and the solid principles which it exists to apply and enforce ; and it assures him and the Government of



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the unbroken continuance of loyal, steadfast, and zealous support in the many stout battles for the common good that now, as always, confront the Liberal army and its leaders."

Asquith was soon launched on the "deep and turbulent stream" which he had seen in front of him when he spoke at the Reform Club. When he became Prime Minister he was preparing his Budget, and had introduced and obtained a first reading for the Licensing Bill which was to be one of the capital measures of the coming session. This Bill proposed a reduction of licences by about one-third of the total number over a period of fourteen years, during which compensation provided by a levy on the trade was to be paid for the licences extinguished. At the end of fourteen years compensation was to cease, and local option was to come into play either for prohibition or for the limitation of numbers. In the meantime the granting of new licences, which in no case were to bring the numbers beyond the scheduled scale for each parish or area, might be prohibited by local option. Drastic reduction of public-houses, re-establishment of the theory that the licence was an annual permit to sell drink which could be revoked without compensation by the authority which gave it, and on this basis the establishment of local option after a period of delay were, in brief, the objects of this measure.

Though the objects were simple enough, the details were voluminous and intricate. Asquith had devoted a great deal of labour to them in 1907 and the early weeks of 1908, and his speech in introducing the Bill (28th April) was a fine example of lucid and orderly exposition. As one of his hearers said, he had the air of a man making a plain statement of simple, obvious, and universally agreed propositions, and proposing a remedy for admitted evils which ought to have astonished by its moderation. He was of course under no illusion as to its reception by the other side, but the outburst of wrath in the Conservative Party astonished both the public and the Government. The Bill was described as "brigandage," "spoliation," "blackmail," "hypocrisy"; and the prospect of the facilities for drinking being curtailed kindled heat and wrath and moral indignation to a higher intensity than any proposal yet made by the Government. It was said that all property was endangered if the publican's expectation that his licence would be renewed was not treated as sacrosanct and indestructible. A Bishop declared that "the licensing system rested on something which should be far better than any freehold—that is the goodwill of the State."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Bishop of Manchester in a letter to *The Times*, 21st March, 1908.

Brewery debenture holders assembled in the Cannon Street Hotel 1908  
protested against the attack on "the savings of the people" Age 55-56  
assumed to be invested in brewery shares.

Asquith was willing to make certain concessions if they would have disarmed his critics, but it was clear from the beginning that the Bill was doomed. It was passed on its second reading in the House of Commons (4th May) by a majority of 246, and carried through Committee in the Autumn Session substantially unaltered. Then on 28th November it went to the House of Lords, where after three days' debate it was rejected on its second reading by a majority of 272 to 96. Its fate had, in fact, been decided at a party meeting of peers at Lansdowne House, where a small but influential minority, which included Lord St. Aldwyn, Lord Cromer, Lord Milner, Lord Balfour of Burleigh, and Lord Lytton was overborne by an overwhelming majority of Conservative peers, who would hear of nothing but summary rejection on second reading. Lord Lansdowne's biographer says that the arguments which most influenced the majority were that "any important amendments would be treated by the Commons as a breach of privilege, and the conviction that an early collision between the two Houses had become inevitable." But it was rumoured at the time that "the Trade" had threatened to reconsider its immemorial support of the Tory Party if any sort of respect was shown to this measure by the House of Lords.

King Edward had for many months past watched the proceedings of the House of Lords with misgiving, and with Asquith's knowledge and approval he had endeavoured to persuade Lord Lansdowne that to attempt to amend the Bill in Committee would be a far wiser course than to reject it on second reading. It appears from a Memorandum published in Lord Lansdowne's *Life*<sup>1</sup> that the King saw Lord Lansdowne on 12th October, and expressed the fear that "if the attitude of the Peers was such as to suggest the idea that they were obstructing an attempt to deal with the evils of intemperance, the House of Lords would suffer seriously in popularity." He added that he was speaking with the knowledge of the Prime Minister, and that he "had reason to know that his Ministers were ready to make considerable concessions to the Opposition, notably in regard to the time limit, which they would, he thought, extend to twenty or twenty-one years, if pressed to do so." Though Lord Lansdowne denied the statement that the Peers had met and decided to reject the Bill, it seems fairly evident from the rest of his reply that his own mind was made up to this course even at that early

<sup>1</sup> Pages 368-9.

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date. "I said that it appeared to me important that we should deal with the Bill in a manner which could not be misunderstood, and that there was some danger of such a misunderstanding if we accepted the principle of the Bill and involved ourselves in a controversy over matters of detail." This was on 12th October, two days before the Bill entered the Committee stage in the House of Commons. The action of the Lords certainly was not misunderstood: it added heavily to the score which the Commons were presently to settle with the Peers. But for the time being the Conservative Party were buoyed up by their success in either winning seats or reducing Liberal majorities at by-elections, and it was their all but unanimous belief that the Lords had done a highly popular thing in rejecting the Bill.

## II

On 7th May Asquith introduced his third and last Budget. It was his own handiwork and he presented it himself, though by this time he had ceased to be Chancellor of the Exchequer. He regarded it with a certain pride as the garnered result of the prudent finance which in the previous two years had reduced debt on an unprecedented scale, and at the same time built up revenue to the point which left a considerable margin for social reform and especially Old Age Pensions, which he now had the satisfaction of seeing safely established. There was a realised surplus of £4,726,000 for the year 1907-1908, and an estimated surplus for the following year on the same basis of taxation of £4,901,000. The Old Age Pensions scheme shortly to be introduced was estimated to cost £2,240,000 in the first year, and to mount up to £6,000,000 or more in the next two years, and it had been generally expected that with this prospect in view there would be no reduction of taxation in the coming year. Asquith decided otherwise, though perhaps not without some misgivings. He believed that the prospect of expanding revenue in the next few years was good enough to justify a reduction of the sugar tax from 4s. 2d. to 1s. 10d. per cwt at a cost to the Exchequer of £3,400,000, and yet leave enough in hand for the financing of old age pensions in the coming year. In the event this remission had serious consequences, for the large new demands for the Navy, which came in before the next Budget, upset this calculation and made imperative the search for new sources of taxation which precipitated the great struggle of 1909.

But in May 1908 there were no signs of this coming storm, and Asquith's last Budget was received with general applause. The



IL. IL. A. WITH DOMINIONS' PRIME MINISTERS, COLONIAL CONFERENCE 1909



foundations seemed to have been securely laid for old age pensions ; sugar was immediately a farthing a pound cheaper ; there were general congratulations on the soundness of the national finance and the self-regarding prudence which had enabled debt to be reduced at the rate of fourteen or fifteen millions a year out of taxation. On 27th May he introduced the Old Age Pensions Bill. It was, as he told the King, a "modest and tentative" measure. It gave (in its final form) 5s. a week to persons of the age of seventy who had not more than £21 a year or 8s. a week of their own, and smaller sums on a sliding scale down to 1s. to those who had not more than £31 10s. a year, or from 11s. to 12s. a week, with disqualifications for paupers or habitual ne'er-do-weels. It was carried through both Houses before the end of July, the attitude of the Opposition being in general that of shaking their heads over a costly and dangerous experiment which they were not prepared either to approve or to run the risk of opposing. When it reached the Lords, Lord Lansdowne said that the "arguments seemed to him conclusive against it," but that he feared the misrepresentation which would follow if the Lords gave effect to that view. Lord Rosebery thought that a "scheme so prodigal of expenditure" might be "dealing a blow at the Empire which might be almost mortal." In the end the Lords made certain amendments in Committee (including one for limiting the duration of the Bill to seven years) which the Speaker ruled out as breaches of the Commons privilege in dealing with conditions under which money should be spent. The time had not yet come when the Lords were ready to challenge the prerogative of the Commons in this sphere, and after registering their protest in a solemn resolution, they submitted. The Bill was hotly criticised by Labour members as ungenerous and inadequate, and Asquith throughout took the line that it was only a first step in the general handling of the poverty problem, through sickness and unemployment insurance and the reform of the Poor Law which the Government had in view. Merely as a first step it was immediately an enormous boon to half a million old people, and to the end of his life Asquith took a special pride in having blazed this trail.

### III

The interminable education question occupied a considerable part of the session and involved the Prime Minister in incessant and fruitless negotiations between Nonconformists and Churchmen. There was Bill No. 1 introduced on 24th February by Mr. McKenna, who

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was then President of the Board of Education, and Bill No. 2 introduced by his successor, Mr. Runciman, on 26th November. The first tried the simple solution of making Council Schools the only schools which children could be compelled to attend and the only schools receiving rate aid. Thus in single-school parishes there were to be none but Council Schools, but in these the denominations were to have special facilities for giving their own kind of religious instruction. For non-provided schools generally there was, as compensation for the loss of rate-aid, to be an increased Exchequer grant which would all but cover the cost of maintenance. The Bill was put down as a basis for discussion, but with an intimation that it would not be proceeded with till later in the session. If anyone supposed that it would afford common ground, he was soon undeceived. Nonconformists thought it too generous to Churchmen; Churchmen and Roman Catholics would have none of it. Mr. Balfour denounced it in unmeasured terms. "You sacrifice education absolutely," he told the Government, "to the violence of your religious prejudice, and to the desire to injure a Church to which you do not belong." The Bishop of Manchester said that "as a specimen of class legislation, of unscrupulous rapacity, and of religious intolerance in the twentieth century, the Bill would deserve a place in historical archives by the side of racks, thumbscrews, boots, and other engines of torture."

The Archbishop of Canterbury, however, had shown a more conciliatory spirit, and in November Mr. Runciman reported to the Cabinet that negotiations with him and the Nonconformist leaders had revealed "a general agreement among moderate men in both camps." Bill No. 2 accordingly proceeded on what at long last was thought or hoped to be agreed ground. Like its predecessor it cut off the non-provided schools from rate aid and made them dependent on the Exchequer grant, but it permitted denominational teaching in Council Schools on two mornings a week for each child, provided such teaching was asked for by the parents, arranged for by the denomination and its cost not borne by the Education Authority. Assistant teachers were permitted to volunteer for such teaching, but not head teachers except the existing head teachers in schools which became Council Schools by being transferred under the Act. As in the previous Bill, all schools in single-school parishes were automatically to become Council Schools, and in all Council Schools the "simple Bible teaching" under the Cowper-Temple Clause was to continue as before.

Asquith himself played an active part in the negotiations which

followed the introduction of this Bill. Ecclesiastical controversies always attracted him and he had a great affection for Archbishop Randall Davidson, who sincerely desired peace. For a fortnight his hopes ran high and he was sanguine that the riddle had at last been answered. But then it began to appear that the Archbishop had run ahead of his episcopal and ecclesiastical brethren, and the Government found itself faced with large new demands upon which it had by no means reckoned. On 4th December he had to report to the King that all was over :

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*Asquith to the King.*

“The situation has completely changed during the last two days. The demand put forward on behalf of the Church for a substantial increase in the very liberal scale of grants proposed by Mr. Runciman to the ‘contracted-out’ Schools is felt by the Government to be quite inadmissible, and would certainly not be sanctioned by a majority of the present House of Commons. It raises a question not of money but of principle—whether the contracted-out schools, free from public control are, in the urban districts, to be the rule or—as the Government have throughout maintained and the Archbishop agreed—the exception. Equally serious obstacles to an immediate settlement are raised by the Bishops. At the meeting of yesterday at the Church House no less than twenty-three of them supported a resolution proposed by the Bishop of Salisbury which makes demands in such vital matters, for instance, as the employment of the Head Teacher to give sectarian instruction, far in excess of those put forward during the negotiations by the Archbishop, and treated both by him and the Government as the basis of the present Bill. In these circumstances Your Majesty’s advisers, with much reluctance, were driven to the conclusion that it was hopeless at this moment to force through as a settlement a measure which so many of the responsible leaders of the Church find unacceptable.

Mr. Asquith reports this decision to your Majesty with the most profound regret. In conjunction with Mr. Runciman, who has shown admirable tact and patience, he has been for weeks in active and continuous negotiations with the leaders of the Church and of Nonconformity, and so much has been conceded by both that there seemed to be a real prospect of an agreed settlement of this protracted and most injurious controversy. These hopes have for the moment been defeated, but Mr. Asquith trusts that the necessary withdrawal of the present Bill will not put a stop to the remarkable movements which the last fortnight has witnessed in favour of a policy of conciliation.”

So ended the last of the efforts to settle the denominational question by consent. Asquith told the House of Commons that he was not ashamed to confess that after a public life now prolonged for many years he had never experienced a more heavy disappointment. This feeling was, perhaps, not universal, and some who



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looked at the question from a purely educational point of view were on the whole relieved that Churchmen had not seized this opportunity to obtain a permanent right of entry into the Council Schools.

#### IV

The autumn of this year was marked by an incident which gave Asquith no little pain and trouble, since it involved a colleague whom he held in the highest respect. As part of the Eucharistic Congress which was being held in London this year it was proposed to hold a solemn procession in which the Host was to be carried through the streets with a great company of Church dignitaries and priests in their vestments attending. There was no doubt that this was contrary to the Catholic Emancipation Act, but the Archbishop of Westminster had communicated with the Chief Commissioner of Police a month before the time fixed and had obtained his sanction on the ground that the law had been waived on at least two previous occasions and might therefore be regarded as obsolete.

The two previous occasions were minor incidents which did not come to the knowledge of the public, but the Eucharistic Procession now proposed was to be on a great and imposing scale, and a wide advertisement was given to it. This evoked a stormy protest in all parts of the country, and, as the day approached, it became evident that there would be a very undesirable uproar, and even some risk of disorder, if the idea of carrying the Host in procession were persisted in. Asquith came into the business late in the day, but when the facts were brought to his notice he at once decided that the Archbishop must be asked to change his plans so as to bring them into conformity with the law.

But it was most desirable that this should be done privately and discreetly, and he therefore appealed to Lord Ripon, the one Roman Catholic member of the Cabinet, to act as his intermediary with the Archbishop. It was a painful and embarrassing mission, for there were now only four days to the date fixed for the Procession, and the Archbishop, who had acted with perfect correctness, had every right to complain at the withdrawal at the last moment of the permission which he had sought and obtained from the Chief Commissioner of Police. Lord Ripon nevertheless very honourably undertook it, and at his instance the Archbishop made the changes necessary to bring his plans within the law.

But Lord Ripon was a man of sensitive conscience, and though he agreed with Asquith that the risk of bitterness and disorder

should at all cost be avoided on so solemn an occasion, he felt that he could not remain a member of a Government which had imposed this disability upon his Church. Accordingly he sent in his resignation, and could not be persuaded to withdraw it, though, with great forbearance, he was content that the reason publicly assigned, should be that of failing health. The circumstances are fully related in his Life, and Asquith was always warm in acknowledgment of the dignity and uprightness with which he acted on this as indeed on all occasions in his long and honourable career.

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Asquith's comment on the incident is contained in a letter to Mr. Herbert Gladstone, who was then Home Secretary, and whose absence in Scotland when the wrong decision was taken had been one of the causes of the trouble :

*Asquith to Mr. Herbert Gladstone.*

10 DOWNING ST.

*Sept. 16, 1908.*

I quite agree with you that the weak point is the delay. Henry<sup>1</sup> ought to have seen at once that this was quite a different thing in scale and importance from the trumpery functions which have been winked at for years. The questions both of law and policy could then have been carefully considered. As it was, we were hurried into a course, and there was the appearance of suddenly withdrawing a permission which had been deliberately given.

But I am quite sure that, given the conditions, the right thing was done in the right way. It was clearly wise and courteous to give the Archbishop, in the first instance, the opportunity of spontaneously and without pressure cutting out the illegal elements.

If the procession in its contemplated form had been allowed to take place, there would have been such an uproar as we have not witnessed for many a day. My letter bag amply proves that.

Meanwhile, Ripon, who is furious at the whole thing, has tendered his resignation. (Sept. 16, 1908.)

Lord Ripon survived his resignation by only nine months. His public life had bridged a long space in British history, and Asquith had taken special pride in the fact that he had in his Cabinet a Minister who had served as Secretary for War in Lord Palmerston's last Administration.

Another personal incident of this year required all Asquith's skill and tact.

Shortly before Parliament rose (17th December) Lord Morley as Secretary of State for India introduced into the House of Lords the scheme for the reform of the Government of India, which became

<sup>1</sup> Sir Edward Henry, Chief Commissioner of Police.

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known in after years as the "Morley-Minto Reforms" (Lord Minto being the Viceroy upon whom it fell to administer this measure). Judged by the standard of subsequent concessions and demands, this may seem but a modest measure; but by bringing Indians into the Governor-General's Council, by setting up Executive Councils for the Provinces with elective members, and by opening the door to public debate and criticism of the Administration on these Councils, it broke new ground in a manner that was thought daring and original in the year 1908, and evoked strong opposition from the old school of administrators and their friends in Parliament. So important was this proposal considered that the House of Commons took umbrage at its being introduced first in the House of Lords, and loudly demanded that there should be at least a simultaneous statement in the House of Commons. Asquith conceded this without dreaming that there could be any objection to it, but with very untoward results, as the following letter shows:

*Asquith to Lord Morley.*

10 DOWNING STREET, S.W.

Dec. 15, 1908.

MY DEAR MORLEY,

I need not tell you that I have read your letter with very real concern, and that I earnestly hope you will reconsider the conclusion of it.

We should have had a motion for the adjournment of the House (which the Speaker would have granted) last night, with a most *pernicious* debate, if I had refused to make any concession.

I accordingly consulted Buchanan, and he agreed with me that to avert this mischief it would be well to promise that some statement should be made in our House the same night as yours. There would of course be no debate, and what we contemplated was a somewhat elongated answer to a question, containing in Buchanan's language, a bald and "jejune" outline or catalogue of what was to be proposed.

This would in no way prejudice, or enter into any competition with, your presentation of the whole case.

We intended to choose, and I believe did choose, the less of two evils. You realise, of course, that the H. of Commons (not only the group of "geese") is exceptionally sensitive just now.

If you still, on full consideration, think that the course suggested would in any way interfere with your own plan, or be prejudicial to the interests of India, pray say so, and I will tell the House of Commons they must wait.

Your resignation at such a moment and on such a ground is a thing which I cannot bring myself to think of.

Yours always,

H. H. A.

Lord Morley was appeased, and his Under-Secretary, Mr. Buchanan, gave the House of Commons a "bald and jejune outline" of what his Chief was developing in a stately and eloquent speech in the House of Lords. It was nevertheless an awkward business, and there was a moment when it seemed as if the whole great scheme might be wrecked on the point of etiquette. "*Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?*" was Asquith's comment on this and several similar occasions.

## V

In addition to destroying the Licensing Bill, the House of Lords rejected the Scottish Small Landholders' Bill on its second reading, and so defaced the Scottish Land Values Bill with amendments which, as Lord Halsbury admitted, were intended to "negative the purpose" of the Bill, that the Government could do nothing but drop it. On the Miners' Eight Hours Bill the situation of the Peers and the Trade Disputes Bill was reproduced, and the Bill escaped<sup>1</sup> not because the Peers liked it, but because the leaders of the Conservative Party judged it imprudent to challenge organised labour on this issue. The Scottish Education Bill had the good fortune to satisfy the Peers, and in the general wreckage on this subject, it was something to have passed a measure which empowered School Boards to make attendance at Continuation schools compulsory between the ages of 14 and 17. Another administrative measure of a useful kind was the Port of London Bill on which both Mr. Winston Churchill, who was now President of the Board of Trade, and his predecessor in the same office (Mr. Lloyd George), had done useful work.

A session which had these measures to its credit and which had witnessed the inauguration of Old Age Pensions was certainly not barren, and legislators who had sat till close upon Christmas could not be charged with any lack of industry. But in December 1908 Asquith realised that the Liberal Party was very nearly at the end of its resources unless it could find a way out of the impasse in which the House of Lords had landed it. The Cabinet agreed that the rejection of the Licensing Bill was not favourable ground for a dissolution, but, as Asquith told the King in reporting the last Cabinet of the year, there was great difference of opinion among his colleagues as to how the next session should be occupied. Practically everything that could be done with the consent of the House of

<sup>1</sup> There was, however, one amendment of some importance, the exclusion of both windings from the computation of hours not, as the Government proposed, for five years, but permanently.

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Lords had now been accomplished, and on all the major measures of Liberal policy—education, temperance reform, land reform, Welsh Disestablishment, Irish Home Rule—the road seemed to be hopelessly blocked. Judged by by-elections the country was apathetic, and the Liberal tide had declined considerably from the high-water mark of 1906. Unjust as it might be, electioneers reported that the Government had suffered considerably in prestige from the acceptance of blows which it was unwilling or unable to resent, and its opponents calculated that they had only to persist in using the House of Lords to destroy its legislation to land it finally in discredit and disaster.

In December 1908 few Liberals saw any clear road through these troubles. There was considerable unemployment which, in spite of the measures that the Government had taken to deal with it, added to the general *malaise* and gave the Tariff Reformers the opportunity of renewing their agitation. There was nothing in the Liberal programme which could be relied upon to stir popular feeling, and some of the measures to which the Government was pledged, such as Welsh Disestablishment and Sickness Insurance, were of doubtful electioneering value, however desirable or necessary they might be on their merits. Pessimists predicted a crash within eighteen months and even optimists saw nothing ahead but a period of declining fortunes. No one foresaw that the House of Lords itself would provide the fighting issue.

But though the party prospects were clouded, Asquith's personal position stood high at the end of his first session as Prime Minister. "It was with the sense not only of expectation more than satisfied but of pride in old friendship that I listened this afternoon," wrote Mr. Haldane on the morning after his second reading speech on the Licensing Bill, "you need not wish ever to do better or to produce a deeper feeling of command in the House." This was the general verdict at the end of the session. He had more than satisfied expectation; he had impressed everyone by his complete command of the House. He seemed to rise with the same facility to every occasion and never to slip or trip. A week before the end of the session he was entertained at dinner at the National Liberal Club by Liberal Members of Parliament in recognition of the manner in which he had conducted the Licensing Bill through the House of Commons, and he seized the occasion to make a declaration on the subject of the House of Lords:

"To put the thing plainly, the present system enables the leader of the party which has been defeated and repudiated by the electors at the

polls to determine through the House of Lords what shall and what shall not be the legislation of the country. The question I want to put to you and to my fellow Liberals outside is this, 'Is this state of things to continue?' We say that it must be brought to an end, and I invite the Liberal Party to-night to treat the veto of the House of Lords as the dominating issue in politics—the dominating issue, because in the long run it overshadows and absorbs every other." (National Liberal Club, 11th December, 1908.)

By this time the demands for the Navy had made it evident to the Cabinet that finance was going to be the dominating question for the next few months, and he added—to the same audience—that "the Budget of next year will stand at the very centre of our work, by which we shall stand or fall, by which certainly we shall be judged in the estimation both of the present and of posterity." The prediction proved truer than he knew, for it was certainly not in his mind at that moment that the Budget and the House of Lords would be linked together in the dominant issue.

## CHAPTER XIX

### A STORM IN EUROPE

A visit to Windsor—The Bosnia-Herzegovina crisis—The proposed conference—M. Isvolsky in London—The question of the Straits—King Edward's view—The submission of M. Isvolsky—The Germans in shining armour—An unpleasant result—An unfounded charge—King Edward and the Tsar. J. A. S.

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Mrs. ASQUITH's diary contains an amusing account of a little scene at Windsor in June 1908, when she and her husband were paying a visit to the King :

“ ‘The Page in Waiting’ informed me that we were to join Their Majesties in the Castle Courtyard at 4 o'clock to motor first to the gardens and then to Virginia Water, where we were to have tea. On my arrival in the Courtyard the King came up to me and said, ‘Where is the Prime Minister?’

Curtseying to the ground I answered, ‘I am sorry, Sir, I have not seen him since lunch; I fear he cannot have got your command and may have gone for a walk with Sir Edward Grey.’

His Majesty (angrily turning to his gentlemen-in-waiting, Harry Stonor and Seymour Fortescue): ‘What have you done? Where have you looked for him? Did you not give my command?’

The distracted gentlemen flew about, but I could see in a moment that Henry was not likely to turn up, so I begged the King to get into his motor. He answered with indignation, ‘Certainly not. I cannot start without the Prime Minister, and it is only 10 minutes past 4.’

He looked first at his watch and then at the Castle clock, and fussed crossly about the yard. Seeing affairs at a standstill I went up to the Queen and said I feared there had been a scandal at Court, and that Henry must have eloped with one of the maids of honour. I begged her to save my blushes by commanding the King to proceed, at which she walked up to him with her amazing grace, and in her charming way, tapping him firmly on the arm pointed with a sweeping gesture to his motor and invited Gracie Raincliffe<sup>1</sup> and Alice Keppel to accompany him: at which they all drove off.

I waited about anxious to motor with John Morley, and finally followed with him and Lord Gosford. While we were deep in conversation Princess Victoria asked if she could take a Kodak of us standing together. (She presented each of us with a copy a few days later.)

<sup>1</sup> The Countess of Londesborough.

When we returned to the Castle we found that Henry had gone for a long walk with the Hon. Violet Vivian, one of the Queen's maids of honour, over which the King was jovial, and even eloquent." 1908 Age 55-56

Asquith was again at Windsor in November 1908 on the occasion of the visit of the King and Queen of Sweden. The Court is now buzzing with excitement about the German Emperor's famous interview in the *Daily Telegraph*, but discretion is specially enjoined in the presence of the Swedish guests who are intimate with the Emperor. King Edward is heard inveighing against Woman Suffrage—to which, like his mother, he had a special antipathy—and he is only with great difficulty persuaded to consent to the appointment of two women—Lady Frances Balfour and Mrs. H. J. Tennant—to the Royal Commission on the Marriage Laws. He did not object to the two ladies, if ladies there had to be, but he saw in their appointment an alarming precedent opening wide doors to developments unthinkable. The King was always annoyed when it was reported that one of his Ministers had attended a Woman Suffrage demonstration, and he expressed himself as specially displeased at Mr. Lloyd George's appearance at the Albert Hall on one of these occasions.

On 6th November, 1908, Mr. Balfour wrote to Lord Lansdowne : " Asquith asked me to speak to him last night after the House rose. He was evidently extremely perturbed about the European situation, which, in his view, was the gravest of which we have had any experience since 1870." That situation arose out of the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary and simultaneously the proclamation of Independence by Bulgaria, which had been announced on 6th October. The affair was from the beginning tangled with intrigue. Isvolsky, the Russian Foreign Minister, and Baron d'Aehrenthal, the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister, had for some time been in secret communication with each other about a plan for settling Balkan affairs at the expense of Turkey without German (or British) intervention, and part of that plan was the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austria, with the opening of the " Straits " so as to enable Russian ships of war to pass from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean as " compensation " for Russia. On 15th September the two men met at Buchlau, the country seat in Moravia of Count Berchtold, the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador in St. Petersburg, and discussed these questions. In the sequel Isvolsky maintained that he had been grossly deceived by d'Aehrenthal, who, contrary to their understanding, rushed the



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Austrian part of the scheme before the Russians had even begun the negotiations on their part. It is still uncertain whether Germany was informed in advance of Austria's intended action,<sup>1</sup> but in any case she decided to consent to it and to support her ally.

Austria had administered, and to all intents and purposes, possessed, the two Provinces since the Treaty of Berlin, but their formal annexation had serious importance from the point of view of prestige, and was a heavy blow both to Russia and to the "Young Turks," who had just carried through their successful revolution against Abdul Hamid. Isvolsky now found himself in an embarrassing position. He could not afford to reveal the facts, which would have shown him to have been outwitted in a not very creditable transaction, and he was farther than ever from obtaining the compensation which might have reconciled his countrymen to the Austrian *coup*. In the meantime both Turks and Serbs were loudly demanding compensation for themselves and with Russia backing the Serbs and Germany backing Austria, the situation passed rapidly to the danger point.

Great Britain had no immediate interest in the status of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but both Asquith and Grey felt very strongly that the tearing up of a Treaty to which all the great Powers were signatory, and without so much as notice to the Turks who were chiefly concerned, was an act which required serious notice on their part. There was, moreover, at that moment a strong feeling of sympathy with the Young Turks, who seemed to have done well and courageously in ridding their country of the blood-stained tyranny of Abdul Hamid. The Government therefore decided to take a strong stand on the principle, and to say firmly that they would not recognise Austria's action until the other Powers who were parties to the Treaty of Berlin were ready to do so. Sir Edward Grey next proposed a Conference of the Powers for the purpose of regularising the situation, obtaining compensation for Turkey and securing the evacuation of the Sandjak of Novi-Bazaar which Austria was willing to concede as a sop to the Turks. But a Conference depended on the good-will of Germany which, as soon appeared, could by no means be taken for granted. Germany had now to decide between the Turks whose friendship she ardently desired to keep, and Austria whom she considered to be her only firm ally, and with whatever reluctance she followed her traditional course of giving her vote to Austria, who desired nothing so little as to appear before a Conference.

<sup>1</sup> For the evidence on this subject see Viscount Grey's *Twenty-five Years*, I, p. 191.

## II

Isvolsky was now in a miserable position. He had just arrived in Paris to start his negotiations about the Straits when he received a brief intimation from Aehrenthal that circumstances had compelled him to take action without delay. He now found himself under the necessity of pursuing as a solitary adventure a project which he had intended to wrap up as part of an all-round scheme for the pacification of South-east Europe. The French were benevolent and sympathetic, but told him that British consent was an indispensable condition. He therefore came to London in the second week of October, and both Asquith and Grey saw him and had long and searching talks with him. He declared himself in favour of the Conference, but as a preliminary to it, asked for a promise from us that we would not oppose the opening of the Straits, for which he was confident he could obtain the consent of the other Powers. The records of these conversations have been published by Lord Grey,<sup>1</sup> and are included among the British Documents. In the result the Cabinet decided, as Asquith reported to the King on 12th October, that M. Isvolsky should be informed “(1) that in our opinion it is highly inopportune to raise this question at the present juncture, and (2) that public opinion in Great Britain would not support any Government which, for no consideration to us, abandoned what has always been regarded here as a valuable Treaty right. The proper consideration of course would be that we and other nations should have a reciprocal right of ingress to the Black Sea.”

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Two days later Sir Edward Grey, after again seeing M. Isvolsky, reported that there were grounds for thinking that Russia might agree to an arrangement on this basis and said that the Russian Minister's assurances, especially about the Anglo-Russian Convention and the Afghan situation, were most satisfactory. But, as the sequel proved, the reciprocal right of ingress and egress was by no means what M. Isvolsky had in mind, and the British attitude combined with the objection of the Turks put an end to this project. The British Cabinet meanwhile held firmly to its view that the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina should not be recognised until it was ratified by a Conference of the Powers. But by this time Germany was firmly behind Austria in declining the Conference and sanctioning the annexation.

In his Guildhall speech on 9th November (his first as Prime

<sup>1</sup> *Twenty-five Years*, I, pp. 179-185. British Documents, Vol. V, ch. 40.

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Minister), Asquith dealt fully with the situation, and said that though the British and the Russian Government had found themselves able to "approach the Near East question from the same point of view," and though the British Government was "in complete sympathy with France, who was the Ally of Russia," it had been "equally frank in its communications with Germany and Italy who were the Allies of Austria." Great Britain, he said, sought no diplomatic victory or advantage for herself; her object was to overcome the difficulties which had arisen without creating new difficulties, and that could only be done by a policy which sprang from general consent. Turning to Germany he recalled the declaration of the Emperor, when he was the guest of the Lord Mayor in the previous year, that the governing purpose of his policy was the preservation of the peace of Europe and the maintenance of good relations between our two peoples. If that spirit prevailed, and if the other Powers cherished the same desire and intention, then he was confident that the clouds which for the moment darkened the sky, would disperse without a storm, peace would be assured, existing friendships be maintained unimpaired, and the atmosphere all round be cleared of the vapours of suspicion and mistrust. In a concluding passage he defined the British attitude on alliances and ententes:

"May I submit to you and to others outside these walls, there should be no talk at such a time of isolation, of hostile groupings, or rival combinations among the Powers, those Powers who are the joint trustees of civilisation and of its greatest and paramount safeguard—the peace of the world? Nothing will induce us in this country to falter or to fall short in any one of the special engagements which we have undertaken, to be disloyal or unfaithful even for a moment to the spirit of existing friendship. In that I feel sure that I speak the determined and unalterable mind of the whole country, but it is equally true of the temper of the Government and of the nation to say that we have neither animosities to gratify nor selfish interests to advance, and that we shall not be reluctant to grasp any hand that is extended to us in good-will and in good faith." (Guildhall, 9th November, 1908.)

### III

The speech was highly praised in all quarters, and appeared to give satisfaction even in Berlin. Prince Bülow told Sir Edward Goschen that he was delighted with it and thought it "quite perfect."<sup>1</sup> But it had little effect on the course of events. For all their peaceful professions, the alliances stood glaring at each other,

<sup>1</sup> British Documents, VI, No. 105.

and all the talk was of preparations for war. By this time the storm centred about Serbia, which was making large demands for "compensation," both territorial and economic, with the apparent support of Russia. Greece, too, was on the move, and desired the annexation of Crete, which at the moment the British Government could not abet without stultifying their principle that alterations in the *status quo* needed the sanction of the Powers in Conference. British Ministers continued to stand on their proposal to regularise the situation through a Conference, but strongly urged Russia not to encourage Serbia in her territorial demands, and said plainly that, if these were persisted in, and war ensued, they would not be willing to lend Russia armed assistance. It was nevertheless in Asquith's mind that any war between the Alliances which broke out in Europe would be likely to involve this country, for when Mr. Balfour had observed that apart from the Entente, Treaty obligations would compel us to intervene if Germany violated Belgian territory, he had not only assented but "said that the Franco-German frontier is now so strong that the temptation to invade Belgium might prove irresistible."<sup>1</sup>

King Edward pleaded for handling these questions "from a European and International point of view," which was somewhat in advance of the policy of his Government:

BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

The King has read with very great interest Mr. Asquith's report of the deliberation of yesterday's Cabinet.

He entirely concurs with the decision the Cabinet have come to respecting the question of a Conference, and of what is proposed in connection with the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and with the declaration of the independence of Bulgaria.

As regards Crete, personally the King is most anxious that the Island should be handed over to Greece, and he considers the question is in some way analogous to that of Sweden and Norway. If some hope could be held out to Crete that England would endeavour to obtain the concurrence of the other contracting Powers to the handing over of the Island to Greece, the King believes that Turkey would hardly care to oppose the proposal, and a very thorny question could then be removed from European politics.

With respect to the more important point, that of the Dardanelles, the King is afraid that unless some hope is given to Russia that England and the other Powers might grant the national aspirations of Russia on this question, Monsieur Isvolsky will return to his country a discredited man, and will have to resign, and it is impossible to say who his successor might be. The King feels that after the Russian Convention with England of a year ago, we are bound, if we wish to retain her friendship, to give

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Lord Lansdowne*, p. 372.

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way on this important point. He hopes the Cabinet are looking at this question from a European and International point of view, and not from merely a domestic one.

EDWARD R.I.

*October 13th, 1908.*

The International point of view was precisely what Asquith and Sir Edward Grey believed themselves to be upholding, but they held it to be incompatible with the seizure of territory or abrogation of Treaty rights without the sanction of the Powers in Conference.

The tension continued all through the winter, Serbia, in Sir Edward Grey's words, being "obstinate and headstrong, Austria haughty, hard, and stern." In January 1909 Austria made her peace with the Turks by agreeing to pay an indemnity of £2,500,000, to consent to an increase of Turkish Customs from 11 to 15 per cent, and to evacuate the Sandjak of Novi-Bazaar. But Serbia still demanded an outlet to the sea, and Austria threatened her with an ultimatum which, if delivered, would almost certainly have brought Russia to the support of Serbia. Then suddenly towards the end of March, Russia threw up the sponge and collapsed unconditionally. The short explanation<sup>1</sup> was that on 21st March Prince Bülow had instructed the German Ambassador in St. Petersburg to inform M. Isvolsky that "unless Russia agreed to recognise the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Germany would leave Austria-Hungary a free hand." The meaning of this was unmistakable, and within a few hours the Tsar telegraphed to the Emperor William consenting to the annexation and expressing the hope that "with God's help war would thus be avoided." Eighteen months later when on a visit to Vienna, the German Emperor claimed credit for having "taken his stand in shining array at a grave moment by the side of their Most Gracious Sovereign."

It was a humiliation for Russia and an displeasing result for both the British and the French Governments, which were left isolated with their now useless project for an International Conference to regularise a situation which had regularised itself thus abruptly. To their astonishment British Ministers who had done nothing throughout but endeavour to find a peaceful solution and to moderate the demands of all the parties now found themselves actually charged in Germany and Austria with having fomented the war spirit. Professor Hans Uebersberger, one of the editors of the Austrian official publication—*Oesterreich-Ungarns Aussenpolitik*, 1908-1914—has not scrupled to say that certain documents therein

<sup>1</sup> Official German Documents (*Grosse Politik*), Vol. 26, No. 9460.

published "show very clearly that during the Annexation Crisis England sought to fan and not to extinguish the flames." The documents referred to contain nothing but "reports from Paris," in the face of them absurd, "that England wished to push France on to war, and that Clemenceau and Pichon had been told that the hour of revenge had come." Others allege that King Edward encouraged the Turks to boycott Austrian goods, and that "an intimate friend of Clemenceau's stated in Vienna that the latter was annoyed because King Edward wished to give the Anglo-French Entente an aggressive edge against Germany." Since the Austrian editors have thought fit to retail this flimsy gossip, and to base on it the charge that Great Britain was stirring up strife, while pretending to play the part of peacemaker, it seems proper to repeat here the categorical denial which Lord Grey has already given to this falsehood.<sup>1</sup>

The course of this affair made a profound impression on Asquith and Grey and other Ministers who kept watch over foreign policy. As Lord Grey has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> it was recognised in after years as a kind of dress rehearsal for the final crisis of 1914. It was from this time onwards distinctly less probable that, if Germany and Austria again practised these methods, Russia would again submit.

It is related in the Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman that in the year 1893 Queen Victoria brought down upon herself the solemn remonstrance of her Ministers for having without their advice taken the momentous step of making her grandson, the German Emperor, Colonel-in-Chief of the First Royal Dragoons. King Edward involved himself in the same sort of trouble by making the Tsar an honorary Admiral of the British Fleet at their much discussed meeting at Reval in June 1908. The correspondence on this subject speaks for itself :

*Asquith to Lord Knollys.*

10 DOWNING STREET,  
WHITEHALL, S.W.

10th June, 1908. 10 p.m.

*Secret.*

Late this afternoon I received a cypher telegram from Hardinge at Reval announcing that the King had appointed the Czar an Hon. Admiral of the British Fleet and expressing the hope that this step would meet with the approval of the Government. I understand that a similar telegram from Fisher has reached the Admiralty. Without for the moment giving any opinion as to the wisdom or otherwise of this proposal, I feel bound to point out that it would have been more in accordance with

<sup>1</sup> *Twenty-five Years*, I, pp. 189-190.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 192-3.

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constitutional practice and with the accepted condition of Ministerial responsibility, if before His Majesty's departure, some intimation had been given to me and my colleagues that it was in contemplation. We are now placed face to face with a *fait accompli*, in regard to which we have had no opportunity of consultation or decision. I must defer sending my answer until I can see and consult Sir E. Grey. The Cabinet which is clearly entitled to a voice in such a matter, cannot be conveniently assembled before Monday. As you know well, this Russian visit has been from the first a delicate affair; we have done our best to remove apprehension and doubts; but where such grave issues are involved, I should not be doing my duty, if I did not suggest, and even urge, the desirability of preliminary notice.

Yours sincerely,

H. H. A.

*From Lord Knollys to Asquith.*

WINDSOR CASTLE.

15 June, 1908.

*Private.*

MY DEAR ASQUITH,

I had an opportunity of speaking to the King this morning about the Admiral of the Fleet incident. I mentioned how much disturbed you and Grey had been, and I told him exactly what you had both said on the subject. I also mentioned that McKenna had been much "put out."

Nothing really could have been "nicer" or more friendly than he was, and he took it all extremely well.

He has now desired me to write to you and say he never thought of proposing that the Emperor of Russia should be appointed Admiral of the Fleet, until the idea suddenly struck him at Reval, that he was totally unaware of the constitutional point, or else he certainly would not have said anything to the Emperor without having first consulted you and McKenna, and that he regretted he had, without knowing it, acted irregularly.

I mentioned to him the awkward position in which you and Grey would have been placed had questions been put in the House of Commons, and I added that nothing could have been "nicer" than you both were about him in connection with the occurrence, and that you and Grey had said you felt sure he would quite understand the matter if it were explained to him. He replied to this that he was always anxious to keep on the best terms with his Ministers and he was I know pleased I saw Grey this afternoon and told him all this, and I have no doubt he repeated the purport of it to you. I am glad the King began the matter to him as it gave him the opportunity of showing H.M. that the question was really of some importance and of corroborating what I had said to him.

Might I suggest that you should write me a letter in reply to this which I could submit to the King. He has told me also, to write a letter of explanation to McKenna, which I think is a good thing.

Yours sincerely,

KNOLLYS.

It seems at this distance of time much ado about nothing, but royal visits and the inferences to be drawn from them were in these years subjects of anxious concern to all the Foreign Offices, and what King Edward meant as a pleasant courtesy was liable to be interpreted in other countries as a symbolic act of high significance.

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## CHAPTER XX

### THE PEERS AND THE BUDGET

The financial problem—Naval Estimates and Social services—Trouble in the Cabinet—The eight Dreadnoughts—Mr. Lloyd George's opportunity—The Budget and the land-taxes—Asquith at Balmoral—Conversations with King Edward—The King and the Unionist Leaders—The Lords reject the Budget—Asquith and the two alternatives—The great Constitutional controversy—The King's attitude—Asquith and Lord Rosebery—The final severance—The Union of South Africa—The question of the colour bar—General Botha's congratulations.  
J. A. S.

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WHEN he laid down the Chancellorship of the Exchequer in order to become Prime Minister, Asquith left tranquillity in the office he was quitting. The rich had grumbled, as usual, at the burden of taxation, but on the assumption that large sums of money had to be raised, his two Budgets, and the third, prepared by himself, which he introduced after he had become Prime Minister, carried general consent. He had made the largest reduction ever made in the same space of time in the National Debt; he had abolished the coal duties, lowered the tea duties, reduced the sugar tax; established the principle that earned income should be taxed at a lower rate than unearned income, and inaugurated the system of old age pensions upon which he had most set his heart. All this, though adding somewhat to the demands upon the rich and well-to-do, was strictly in line with Treasury tradition and orthodox finance.

But from this point onwards two things worked together to compel the Government to look for new sources of revenue. One was the increasing demand for social services, especially the schemes for sickness and unemployment insurance which were now in preparation; the other the growing menace of the German naval competition, which required large increases in our naval estimates. In April 1908 the German Government introduced a new Navy Law, which in effect increased the annual German programme to four capital ships a year, and made it highly probable that, unless British ship-building was largely increased, Germany might be actually superior to us in capital ships by the year 1914. In these circumstances the Government had either to give up their social

programme or to expose the country to the risk of being outbuilt by Germany, unless they saw their way to raise a large additional revenue. 1909  
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Parties were characteristically divided between these alternatives. Unionists were hot on the scent for an immediate increase of naval armaments, and desired nothing more than that a check should be placed on Radical programmes. Liberals and Radicals who had built high hopes on the Hague Conference and the expected reduction of armaments were at the best reluctant converts to the necessity of an increase of ship construction, and stipulated that in any case their schemes of social reform should not be held up. At the same time the coming of Mr. Lloyd George to the Chancellorship of the Exchequer introduced a new and lively element into the conduct of finance, and gave a peculiar intensity to the argument which all through the autumn and winter of 1908 and the spring of 1909 went on unabated behind the scenes as to the proper solution of the problem.

Mr. Lloyd George was for long unconvinced about the necessity of the programme which Mr. McKenna, the First Lord of the Admiralty, backed by his sea-lords now declared to be imperative, and he was strongly supported in his resistance by Mr. Winston Churchill. The battle raged for several weeks in the Cabinet with threats of resignation on the one side or the other. Mr. McKenna demanded the immediate construction of six Dreadnoughts ; Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Churchill insisted that four were enough. Finally, Asquith himself brought peace by proposing that four should be laid down immediately, but provision be made for the rapid construction of four more beginning from 1st April in the following year, i.e. within the same financial year, or earlier if the need was proved. But even this required an argument which excited the public, and led to a fierce agitation in which all eight were demanded at once. "We want eight, and we won't wait," was the slogan of the hour. The Government bowed to the storm, and Mr. McKenna, who had fought his case with great pertinacity, and at one moment came within an inch of resigning, got two ships more than he had originally demanded. As Mr. Churchill puts it, "a curious and characteristic solution was reached. The Admiralty had demanded six ships : the economists offered four, and we finally compromised on eight."<sup>1</sup> Asquith's own leanings were to the original six, but he was not at all averse when this queer turn of the wheel made them eight.

<sup>1</sup> *World Crisis*, 1911-14, pp. 136-8.

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Two letters to his wife, who happened to be out of London during some of this time, give vivid glimpses of the wrestlings of these days :

*Asquith to his Wife.*

10 DOWNING STREET.

*Feb. 20, 1909.*

The King's speech was on the whole well received and the debate so far has been eventless, but there is considerable underground rumbling and agitation over the Navy. The economists are in a state of wild alarm, and Winston and L. G. by their combined machinations have got the bulk of the Liberal press into the same camp. There is no real danger in the Cabinet—both J. Morley and Loulou (Lewis Harcourt) for various reasons being very disinclined to make common cause with the other two. They (the two) go about darkly hinting at resignation (which is bluff) and there will in any case be a lot of steam let off, and at any rate a temporary revival of the old pro-Boer animus. I am able to keep a fairly cool head amidst it all, but there are moments when I am disposed summarily to cashier them both. E. Grey is a great stand-by, always, sound, temperate, and strong.

*Feb. 25, 1909.*

We had our final Cabinet on the Navy yesterday, and I was quite prepared for a row and possible disruption. A sudden curve developed itself of which I took immediate advantage, with the result that strangely enough we came to a conclusion which satisfied McKenna and Grey and also L. G. and Winston. The effect will be to make us stronger in 1912 than McKenna's original proposal would have done.

A time was to come when all the parties to this controversy were thankful that it ended so ; but at the moment the triumph of the big-navy party strengthened the determination of the Radicals that there should be no weakening on the Budget. If money had to be found for the great shipbuilding programme, money, they insisted, should be found also for the social reforms upon which the party had set its heart, and found by those who could best afford the sacrifice and had been loudest in calling for the increased armaments. Mr. Lloyd George leapt to the occasion. It took him at a bound out of the ruck of conventional Chancellors of the Exchequer, engaged him in the kind of controversy in which he most delighted, promised new issues and adventures for a party which after three years was beginning to feel the inevitable reaction. In the light of later experience the raising of fourteen millions of extra taxation seems so modest an enterprise that it is difficult to think of it as furnishing material for either a heroic effort on the part of a Chancellor of the Exchequer or a convulsive protest on the part of those who were called upon to pay. An income-tax rising on a graduated scale

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from 9d. to 1s. 2d. in the pound ; a super-tax beginning at £3000 for those whose incomes exceeded £5000 ; death duties taking no more than 10 per cent up to £200,000, may well seem merciful to a generation which has come to think of income-tax in units of sixpence and a shilling, and even to take a certain pride in the fact that the Exchequer claims upwards of 50 per cent of the incomes of the very rich. It has been said that if Asquith had been in charge of the 1909 Budget it would have gone through with little more than the protest that had accompanied Sir William Harcourt's Budget of 1894. Possibly even he might have had trouble with the land-taxes, or at least with the valuation attaching to them, but in Mr. Lloyd George's hands all these taxes became flags and symbols in a ringing debate between wealth and poverty ; and nothing in the coming months seemed to give him more pleasure than to lure the " dukes " and the idle and innocent rich into encounters in which their slower minds and halting tongues were very unequally matched against his nimble wits and picturesque eloquence.

The land-taxes embodied the idea—for long an article in the Liberal and Radical creed—of taxing the " unearned increment." They required a valuation at a given date and took the form of a duty of one-fifth or 20 per cent, when the property was sold or passed at death, upon all increases of value which had accrued from the enterprise of the community or of the landowners' neighbours. There was also to be an annual duty of  $\frac{1}{2}$ d. in the £ upon " undeveloped land," i.e. land which had a site value, but which was not being used for building, and which was possibly or probably being held up until its site value had ripened. There was finally a 10 per cent reversion duty on any benefit accruing to a lessor on the termination of a lease. Spirit, tobacco, motor and petrol taxes also played their part, but these raised no more than the customary grumbles, except among the Irish who were irreconcilable about the spirit-taxes.

Asquith has put on record his own view of the land-taxes :

" It was the land taxes, and perhaps still more the proposed valuation of land, which ' set the heather on fire.' Their immediate yield was estimated to be very small, but the alarmists saw in them a potential instrument for almost unlimited confiscation. Being supposed myself to be a financier of a respectable and more or less conservative type, I was, in the course of the debates, frequently challenged by Mr. Balfour and others to defend the new imposts, and especially the Undeveloped Land and the Increment Duties. I have undertaken in my time many more intractable dialectical tasks, and though I was fully alive to the mechanical difficulties involved, and perhaps not so sanguine as some of my colleagues

1909 as to the progressive productiveness of the taxes, I had never any doubt  
 Age 56 as to their equity in principle. The Increment Duty, in particular, applied only to the enhancement in the value of land which is not due to any enterprise or expenditure on the part of the owner, but to the growth, and often to the actual expenditure, of the community. 'Upon that added value' (I argued) 'it is consistent with natural justice, with economic principle, and with sound policy, that the State should from time to time levy toll.'"<sup>1</sup>

## II

The Finance Bill of 1909 was in Committee for forty-two days, and the necessarily intricate machinery for giving effect to the new taxes gave opportunities for prolonged and persistent criticism and obstruction from the Opposition benches. During these weeks Sir William Robson, the Attorney-General, an old comrade in arms for whom Asquith had a deep affection, was a tower of strength to the Government. In their dislike of the spirit-tax the Nationalists went to the length of voting with the Opposition against the second reading, but contented themselves with abstaining on the third reading. The whole Liberal and Radical Party stood solidly behind the Government through all the stages, and the Bill was finally passed on 4th November by 379 to 149.

The main interest, however, was not in the discussion of technicalities in the House of Commons, but in the platform warfare organised by the "Budget League" and the "Budget Protest League," which raged in the country all through the summer and autumn. Asquith through it all remained cool and argumentative, bringing a careful moderation of language to bear on all proposals that were thought extreme. His defence of the Budget to an audience of business men at the Cannon Street Hotel (23rd July) will still bear reading as a shining example of clear exposition and business-like argument. But so far as the country was concerned, the honours rested with Mr. Lloyd George; and the bandying of epithets between him and the "Dukes" delighted and incensed a vast audience, which was indifferent to the Cannon Street style. King Edward watched these performances with a good deal of displeasure, and begged the Prime Minister to moderate the language, which he characterised as "Billingsgate," of his Chancellor of the Exchequer. Nothing could have exceeded the good humour with which Mr. Lloyd George accepted these remonstrances, or his promises to walk warily on the next occasion. He was sincerely of opinion that his language was much more restrained than the occasion would have

<sup>1</sup> *Fifty Years of Parliament*, II, p. 69.

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warranted, and, to Asquith's amusement, claimed for his Newcastle speech that it was a signal example of moderation. In a letter to Asquith, Lord Knollys begged him not to "pretend to the King" that he liked Mr. Lloyd George's speeches, for the King would not believe it, and it only irritated him.

But the King, who wished above all things to avoid another collision between the two Houses, had serious grounds for misgiving. He had tried in vain to prevent the Peers from rejecting the Licensing Bill in the previous year, and now he saw them hardening towards the rejection of the Budget—a thing thought to be beyond the pale of constitutional possibilities. Early in October Asquith was summoned to Balmoral, and a note dated 6th October gives the gist of his conversations with the King :

BALMORAL CASTLE.

Oct. 6, 1909.

I saw the King immediately on my arrival. He entered almost at once on the subject of the Budget and the Lords.

He asked me whether I thought he was well within constitutional lines in taking upon himself to give advice to, and if necessary put pressure upon, the Tory leaders at this juncture.

I replied that I thought what he was doing and proposing to do, perfectly correct, from a constitutional point of view ; that the nearest analogy was the situation and action of William IV, at the time of the Reform Bill ; in both cases the country was threatened with a revolution at the hands of the House of Lords.

He said that, in that case, he should not hesitate to see both Balfour and Lansdowne on his return to London.

He went on to say that they might naturally ask what, if they persuaded the Lords to pass the Budget, they were to get in return. It had occurred to him that the best answer would be : "An appeal to the country—such as you say you want : only *after* and not before the final decision on the Budget" ; in other words a dissolution and general election in January.

What had I to say to this ? Should I approve his holding such language to them ?

I replied that I should like more time for consideration before giving a definite answer, but I would venture at once to put before him the points which *prima facie* suggested themselves.

First I would look at his proposal from their point of view, i.e. that of the Tory leaders. I doubted whether it would have many attractions for them. It means a general election immediately after the Lords, who had been egged on to resistance for months by the whole party press and platform, had climbed down and given in ; not an exhilarating or stimulating situation from a party point of view. Further, they might well calculate that they had more to gain than to lose from a delay which could not in any case be very prolonged—in the facts (a) that the sting of the agitation against the H. of Lords would have been removed by

1909 the passing of the Budget and (b) that the Budget itself, when it passed  
Age 56 from Parliament to platform into the hands of the tax-gatherer, would lose much, if not the whole, of its glamour.

Next, looking at the matter from our point of view, and that of the country at large, I saw many objections to a January election unless it were rendered necessary by the rejection of the Budget. January with its short days and bad weather and coming just after Xmas. is one of the most inconvenient months for a general election. Moreover, what pretext could I allege to my party and the country for advising a dissolution immediately after the passing of the Budget? The H. of Commons is only just four years old, and there are still measures of great importance which we have promised to bring before it, and which we could only be justified in laying aside by the urgency of a Constitutional crisis forced upon us against our will. In my judgment—though it was of course a mere forecast of the incalculable—the outcome of an election fought under such conditions was not unlikely to be a very small majority either way between the British parties, with the decisive vote in critical matters left to the Irish; a very undesirable state of things.

I did not think (I added) that a dissolution could be very long delayed, but the arguments against forcing it on in January seemed to me to be difficult to answer.

The King appeared to be impressed by the force of these considerations—especially those which tended to show that the promise of an early dissolution would not offer great temptations to the other side.

We then passed to other topics—leaving open this one for further discussion.

H. H. A.

Whether, if King Edward had lived, an election could have been postponed for any length of time if the Lords had accepted the Budget may be open to doubt, but Asquith naturally at this stage was unwilling to bargain with the Lords by promising an election in return for the passing of the Budget. It was in fact a large part of his case that the Peers had no right to force a dissolution.

On his return to London, the King gave an interview (12th October, 1909) at Buckingham Palace to Lord Lansdowne and Mr. Balfour. Asquith saw him immediately afterwards, and gathered that “the substance of what they had told him was that they had not yet decided what action the House of Lords should be advised to take.” That was no doubt literally true, but by this time the Unionist Party was being driven down the steep place by the combined pressure of rich men who feared for their property, and the Tariff Reformers who saw their last chance gone, if the Budget went through, and were persuaded that the moment was favourable for forcing the issue. With these two driving forces behind it, the movement for rejection had gained impetus all through the summer, and the decision appears to have been a foregone conclusion by the

time the King saw the two Unionist leaders. According to his biographer,<sup>1</sup> Lord Lansdowne told Lord Balfour of Burleigh at the beginning of October that "upon the whole he was in favour of rejection," and about the same time Lord Cawdor, while staying at Balmoral, prepared a memorandum for the King which strongly favoured the same course. Mr. Balfour is said "from an even earlier period to have come to the conclusion that no compromise was possible." On the other hand Lord Rosebery, though detesting the Budget and thinking it to be the beginning of a socialism which would be "the end of all things," was strongly opposed to "staking the existence of the House of Lords" on its rejection, and the same view was taken by Lord St. Aldwyn, and still more strongly by the group of Free Trade Unionist peers including Lord Cromer, Lord James of Hereford, and Lord Balfour of Burleigh, who viewed with great alarm the latest effort of the Tariff Reformers to stampede the Unionist Party. The opposition of this group, however, was, as usual, an active irritant to the Tariff Reformers who, thinking the destruction of the Budget to be essential to their movement, were for going all lengths, and, in Lord Milner's phrase, "damning the consequences."

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On the last day of October the King's Secretary wrote gloomily of "the tendency in the minds of Mr. Balfour and Lord Lansdowne," but so long as the Finance Bill was in the Commons, Asquith in all his public utterances continued to treat the idea of its rejection by the House of Lords as beyond belief. In his final speech on the third reading he presented the Government's proposals as the far preferable alternative to "Tariff Reform," and only in a last sentence glanced at the possibility which lay ahead :

"What are the two ways, and the only two ways before the country of meeting the necessities of the nation? On the one hand you may do as we are doing. You may impose, simultaneously and in fair proportion, taxes on accumulated wealth, on the profits of industry, on the simpler luxuries, though not the necessities, of the poor. You may seek, as we are seeking, for new taxes on those forms of value which at present are either inadequately taxed or not taxed at all; values which spring from monopoly; which are not the fruit of individual effort or enterprise; but which are the creation either of social growth, or of the direct activity of the State itself.

That is one way—that is the way proposed by this Budget. What is the other, the only other, that has yet been disclosed or even foreshadowed to Parliament and the country? It is to take a toll of the prime necessities of life; it is to raise the level of prices to the average consumer of commodities; it is to surround your markets with a Tariff wall which, in

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Lansdowne*, pp. 378–380.



1909 so far as it succeeds in protecting the home producer, will fail to bring  
Age 56 in revenue, and in so far as it succeeds in bringing in revenue, will fail to protect the home producer.

That, Sir, is the choice which has to be made, and if to these alternatives there is to be added another which I decline to believe, the choice between the maintenance and the abandonment by the House of its ancient constitutional supremacy over all matters of national finance, I say there is not a man who sits here beside or behind me to-night who is not ready to join issue."

### III

What Asquith "declined to believe" on 4th November became a fact on 30th November, when the Lords rejected the Budget by a majority of 350 to 75. By taking this action on the second reading they had cut themselves off from all controversy on details (e.g. on whether certain parts of the Bill, such as the provision of the valuation machinery required by the land-taxes, might be regarded as "tacking"), and boldly claimed the right to reject the entire Budget. Until the summer of this year no one in either party had thought of such a thing as possible. There was no precedent for it for at least 250 years; it had been the universal assumption in all parties that the House of Commons, and that House alone, controlled finance; that money grants, as the form of the King's Speech indicated, were made by "Gentlemen of the House of Commons," the elected representatives of the people, and that it was beyond the competence of the House of Lords to bring a Government to a standstill and force a dissolution by holding up its provision for taxation and expenditure. The rejection of the Budget turned all these constitutional assumptions upside down, and it was plain that if it could not be resented at once, and prevented in the future, the control of the Executive through the control of the purse would have passed from the House of Commons to the House of Lords.

If such a controversy had to be, Asquith with his legal training and constitutional habit of mind was supremely well equipped to conduct it, and from 30th November, 1909, when the House of Lords threw down the challenge, until 10th August, 1911, when it accepted the Parliament Bill, he was supreme over all rivals. His mastery of constitutional law and practice, his sense of history, his moderate yet massive manner of speech, his instinctive dislike of all brawling and vulgarity, enabled him throughout to keep the argument on a high plane, and to impress the public with its greatness and gravity. On 2nd December he set the lists for the appeal to the country by proposing the following resolution in the House of Commons :

“That the action of the House of Lords in refusing to pass into law the financial provision made by this House for the service of the year is a breach of the Constitution and a usurpation of the rights of the Commons.” 1909 Age 56

In a serious argument enlivened by brilliant raillery he covered the whole ground of recent controversy between the two Houses, and summed up the immediate issue in his closing words :

“The House of Lords has deliberately chosen its ground. They have elected to set at nought, in regard to finance, the unwritten but time-honoured conventions of our Constitution. In so doing, whether they foresaw it or not, they have opened a wider and a more far-reaching issue. We have not provoked the challenge. We believe that the first principles of representative government, as embodied in our slow, our ordered, but ever-broadening developments, are at stake, and we ask the House of Commons by this resolution to-day, as, at the earliest possible moment we shall ask the constituencies of the country, to declare that the organ and voice of the free people of this country is to be found in the elected representatives of the nation.”

The resolution was carried by a majority of 215 (349 to 134), and Parliament was dissolved on 3rd December, the first day of the General Election being fixed for 14th January in the New Year.

On 15th December the King's Secretary, Lord Knollys, had a conversation with Asquith's Secretary, Mr. Vaughan Nash, which the latter reported to his chief in the following memorandum :

*Memorandum by Mr. Vaughan Nash.*

10 DOWNING STREET,  
WHITEHALL, S.W.

*Dec. 15, 1909.*

Lord Knollys asked me to see him this afternoon and he began by saying that the King had come to the conclusion that he would not be justified in creating new peers (say 300) until after a second general election and that he, Lord K., thought you should know of this now, though, for the present he would suggest that what he was telling me should be for your ear only. The King regards the policy of the Government as tantamount to the destruction of the House of Lords and he thinks that before a large creation of Peers is embarked upon or threatened the country should be acquainted with the particular project for accomplishing such destruction as well as with the general line of action as to which the country will be consulted at the forthcoming Elections.

When it came to discussing this more in detail the following points emerged :

1. That if the plan adopted for dealing with the Veto follows the general lines of the House of Commons resolution coupled with shorter Parliaments (the King prefers four years to five) the King would concur, though apparently he would still hesitate to create Peers.

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2. That his objection to the creation of Peers would be "considerably diminished" if Life Peers could be created. (I pointed out to Lord Knollys that this would involve legislation to which the House of Lords might object.)

As to the first point I said that your speech at the Albert Hall indicated that the plan to be adopted would follow the general lines of the C.-B. plan.

Lord Knollys went on to say that it was in view of the objections which the King was likely to raise that he had advocated the introduction of legislation dealing with the Lords before supplies were dealt with by the new Parliament as by this means a lever might be brought to bear which would obviate the necessity of creating Peers. I replied that whatever the merits of such a procedure might be, the practical difficulties were, as I understood, serious, the gravest being the short time available for getting the Finance Bill through. Moreover the onus as regards a financial deadlock would, in the circumstances, be held to rest not on the Lords but on the Government. And he quite saw the force of this.

Lord Knollys was very anxious that some alternative method of coercion should be devised. For instance was there anything in the idea of summoning only such Peers as would give a majority to the Finance Bill? I said I would ask your opinion, but I thought you would regard such a scheme as fantastic and impracticable, apart from its bearing on the Monarch.<sup>1</sup>

Before coming away I thought I had better ask Lord Knollys whether the King realised that at the next General Election the whole question of the Lords would be fully before the country, and that the electors would know that they were being invited to pronounce, not indeed on the details, but on the broad principles which were involved in the Government's policy. I also asked what he thought would be the position as regarded the creation of peers if it turned out that the House of Lords refused to accept legislation forbidding them to touch finance. From the vague answers he gave I came away with the impression that the King's mind is not firmly settled and that it might be useful if you saw him some time before the Elections, possibly on the 8th, the day of the Dissolution Council.

V. N.

Asquith, therefore, entered upon the Election of January 1910 with the knowledge that not one but in all probability two elections would be necessary before King Edward would be persuaded to exercise his prerogative, if, as was practically certain, the House of Lords resisted the Liberal scheme for limiting its powers. The condition of the second election was to be fulfilled in the reign of King Edward's successor.

<sup>1</sup> All these possibilities were explored during the next fifteen months including the withholding of the writ of summons from a majority of the existing peers, but which, though legally possible, was held to be invidious for the King and more threatening in its permanent consequences to the House of Lords than the creation of peers for a special purpose.

## IV

It may be added here that the controversy about the Budget brought the final severance of political relations between Asquith and Lord Rosebery. On 10th September Lord Rosebery made a speech to a meeting of business men at Glasgow in which he denounced the new taxes root and branch, and declared that he had "long ceased to be in communication with the Liberal Party." Asquith wrote to him the following day :

*Asquith to Lord Rosebery.*

LYMPNE CASTLE,<sup>1</sup>  
LYMPNE,  
KENT.

Sept. 11, 09.

MY DEAR R.

I need not tell you I have read your Glasgow speech with the most profound regret.

It marks, as you say, the parting of the political ways between yourself and (I believe) every one of the old colleagues and comrades who have in the past fought under you on your side.

It may be that we are all wrong, and that you alone are right ; it may be——

Time will decide between these alternatives. But in the meanwhile anything in the nature of political co-operation becomes (by your own showing) the hollowest of pretences, and it is quite impossible for myself and my colleagues to continue to serve under your Presidency as Vice-Presidents of the Liberal League.

It is with sincere pain that I write these lines, and with the assured hope that nothing will disturb our long and tried personal friendship.

Yours always,  
H. H. A.

Lord Rosebery replied :

*Lord Rosebery to Asquith.*

HOAR CROSS,  
BURTON-ON-TRENT.

Sept. 14, /9.

MY DEAR A.,

I have only this moment received your letter of Sept. 11.

I quite agree that in view of my heartfelt hostility to the principles of the Budget, political co-operation is not at present possible between us. So it has been in effect since the General Election, for I do not think that you or the Vice-Presidents have had any contact with the League since that time. And in view of the complications that my speech might

<sup>1</sup> Lympe Castle belonged to Mr. Asquith's brother-in-law, Mr. Frank Tennant, at that time.

1909 produce I resigned the Presidency of the League the day before I spoke  
 Age 56 at Glasgow. That aspect of the question then is simple enough, but I think the other is even easier. I hope none of us could contemplate for a moment any diminution of our friendship by any political difference. I think that you have left me rather than that I have left you, but were it otherwise I hope we shall give each other the credit of acting conscientiously. All my old political friendship is locked up in your Cabinet. I doubt if any of you realise the painful struggle I had to face before speaking, but I think you must recognise by the dates that I was in no hurry to speak. As I wrote to you last year I am a cross-bench man for life, and as I spoke for your Licensing Bill in November, so now I speak against your Budget; the balance is not unequal.

However that may be, of course our friendship must remain unaffected; it never even occurred to me that it could be otherwise. . . .

Yours,  
 R.

It was perhaps inevitable that the two men should see less of each other than in former days, but the old friendship survived unbroken to the end of Asquith's life.

## V

In all the turmoil of the year 1909 there was one achievement which Asquith looked back upon with unqualified satisfaction, and that was the Act establishing the Union of South Africa. Bearing in mind his own record on the South African War—about which he never repented—he had felt it to be a debt of honour, due especially from him, as a Liberal statesman, that the final settlement should be liberal and complete. He had worked hard at the details of the constitution, which, in the first year of the Campbell-Bannerman Government, had given responsible government to the Transvaal, and he now bent himself with the legal and constitutional enthusiasm which was part of his make-up, to the scheme for the Union of South Africa.<sup>1</sup> Up to the end of 1908 the policy which this scheme embodied had been denounced by Lord Milner and many of the Opposition leaders as incredibly rash and precipitate, but when it

<sup>1</sup> This scheme set up a Senate and a House of Assembly for the whole Union, the former consisting of forty members, eight nominated by the Governor-General in Council, and eight elected for each Province, and the latter of one hundred and twenty-one members elected, except in the Cape where the native franchise was retained, by voters of European descent. Provincial Councils were established for the four Provinces, the Cape, the Transvaal, the Orange Free State, and Natal, and certain powers specifically delegated to them, all others, including the care and treatment of natives, being reserved for the Central authority. (This authority was vested in addition with one overriding legislative power, with the result that the Constitution is one which follows the unitary and not the federal model.) For the time being the Protectorates, Basutoland, Bechuanaland, Swaziland were reserved to the Imperial Government.

became known that it was accepted as a fair settlement by all parties in South Africa, where it had been hammered into shape at a Convention and submitted to the Parliaments of each of the four Provinces, opposition died down, and the Bill giving effect to it was passed with practical unanimity by both Houses. It was introduced and passed first in the Lords at the beginning of August and later in the Commons on 19th August.

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The sole point of controversy was the "colour bar." On this Asquith was perfectly frank, and when amendments were proposed for admitting natives to the Senate, or permitting them to vote for the Assembly in Provincial Councils, he said without any beating about the bush that he greatly regretted that the exclusion of the natives had been introduced into the Constitution. But he was not prepared to jeopardise "this most delicately and elaborately constructed document," the result of a long, difficult, and laborious process, of argument and compromise between parties and Parliaments in South Africa by insisting on an amendment which would throw it all into the melting pot. On this ground he appealed to the House not to pass the amendment proposed by Mr. Barnes extending the franchise to natives :

"I ask the House of Commons, Can you take the responsibility of incurring this risk ? However strongly you may feel, however much you may wish that this provision had not been inserted in the Bill, however ardently you may hope—and no one can hope more ardently than I—that before long it may be removed, can you at this moment of South African Union, a thing which a few years ago seemed beyond the region of hope and as having passed into the darkness of despair, can you take on yourselves that responsibility on the eve of the consummation of those hopes ? I appeal to hon. members not to do so."<sup>1</sup>

The House responded to this appeal by rejecting the amendment by 158 to 57.

Handsome acknowledgments now came from the Unionist leaders. "Whatever opinion we may hold as to the past," said Mr. Balfour, "everybody looking back at the past will, I am confident, agree with me that this Bill, soon I hope to become an Act, is the most wonderful issue out of all those divisions, controversies, battles, and outbreaks, the devastation and horrors of war, the difficulties of peace. I do not believe the world shows anything like it in its whole history."<sup>2</sup>

The King telegraphed his warm congratulations on hearing of the safe passage of this measure, and many other tributes followed.

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons, 15th August, 1909.

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons, 16th August.

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One which Asquith specially valued came from Mr. J. W. Hofmeyer, the veteran leader of the Africander party, who wrote :

*Mr. J. W. Hofmeyer to Asquith.*

"I cannot leave for the Continent without . . . saying how much I appreciate the evident anxiety shown not only by you but by the whole of your Ministry during the passage of the S. A. Union Bill through Parliament to place yourselves in the position of your South African fellow-subjects and do justice to their aspirations.

So long as sentiments such as those given utterance to by you and your colleagues actuate His Majesty's Ministers we South Africans need fear no undue interference with our rights and liberties and Britons may rest assured that the ties which bind South Africa to the British Empire will not be lightly broken." (23rd August, 1909.)

The letter which General Botha wrote on the same occasion, and Asquith's reply have already been published, but they must be repeated here :

*General Botha to Asquith.*

SANATORIUM OF GRAT. DAPPER,  
KISSINGEN.

23. 8. 09.

DEAR MR. ASQUITH,

Now that the South African Bill has safely passed both Houses of Parliament and thereby the Union of the four self-governing Colonies in South Africa has practically become an established fact, I cannot refrain from congratulating you and the great party of which you are the leader upon the success which has followed your liberal policy in South Africa.

It is due to the far-seeing policy of your party, carried out bravely in most difficult circumstances, that all has gone so well in South Africa and that its position as an integral portion of the British Empire has become assured. There are many to-day who claim a larger or smaller share of the credit in connection with the realisation of Union in South Africa, but this one thing is certain, that only the liberal policy of your Government has made that Union possible and in South Africa at all events the great majority of the people fully appreciate this. Only after a policy of trust in the whole population of Transvaal and O.R.C. had taken the place of one of coercion could we dream of the possibility of a Union of the Colonies, and above all of the two white races. My greatest regret is that one noble figure is missing—the man who should have lived to see the fruits of his work—the late Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. For what he has done in South Africa alone the British Empire should always keep him in grateful memory.

I have carefully followed the debates in the House of Commons and  
read your able speech with great admiration.

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Believe me,

Yours sincerely,

LOUIS BOTHA.

The Right Honourable H. H. Asquith.

*Asquith to General Botha.*

10 DOWNING STREET,

WHITEHALL, S.W.

27 August, 1909.

MY DEAR GENERAL BOTHA,

It was a great pleasure to me to receive your letter, and that pleasure is shared by all my colleagues in the Cabinet, to whom I had yesterday the gratification of communicating it.

There is nothing in our conduct of affairs during the last four years on which we look back with so much satisfaction as the full and free grant of self-government to the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony, which has rendered possible that which, at our advent to power, seemed an unrealisable dream—the Union of South Africa.

I am glad that we were able to secure the passage of the Act of Union without amendment through both Houses of Parliament.

Let me add that we feel a deep sense of gratitude to yourself, and your colleagues, for the splendid and single-minded patriotism with which you have devoted yourselves to the great work of reconciliation and union.

Believe me to be,

Very faithfully yours,

H. H. ASQUITH.

The Rt. Hon. L. Botha.

General Botha and his wife became intimate friends of Asquith and his wife. Asquith has often been heard to say that he never knew a better man or finer character than Botha.



## CHAPTER XXI

### THE STRUGGLE WITH THE PEERS

The Budget Election—Asquith's speeches—A wide mandate—Parties and the result—A perplexing situation—Mr. Redmond's threat—The Liberal Party and the "Guarantees"—Difficulties with the Irish—"Wait and See"—The Cabinet and the Lord's veto—Veto and reform—The three resolutions—A precarious position—Passing of the Budget—The "Steps to be taken"—A Mediterranean holiday—Death of King Edward—The King's Funeral—The German Emperor's impressions.  
J. A. S.

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ASQUITH opened the Budget Election campaign with a speech at the Albert Hall on 10th December, which may be said to have laid down the lines for the controversies that were to occupy Parliament up to the outbreak of war. He described the action of the House of Lords in rejecting the Budget as "a new and entirely unexpected danger to popular liberties," which two years previously was "as undreamt of as would have been the revival by an arbitrary Minister of the veto of the Crown." He intimated that the policy of the Government would be not only the "defensive" one of making statutory the control of national finance by the House of Commons, but an advance to the "still larger issue" which the Lords themselves had raised and "hurried on":

"I tell you quite plainly and I tell my fellow countrymen outside that neither I nor any other Liberal Minister supported by a majority in the House of Commons is going to submit again to the rebuffs and the humiliations of the last four years. We shall not assume office and we shall not hold office unless we can secure the safeguards which experience shows us to be necessary for the legislative utility and honour of the party of progress. . . . We are not proposing the abolition of the House of Lords or setting up a single Chamber, but we do ask, and we are going to ask, the electors to say that the House of Lords shall be confined to the proper functions of a second Chamber. The absolute veto which it at present possesses must go. The power which it claims from time to time of, in effect, compelling us to choose between a dissolution and—so far as legislative projects are concerned—legislative sterility must go also. The people in future, when they elect a new House of Commons, must be able to feel, what they cannot feel now, that they are sending to Westminster men who will have the power not merely of proposing and

debating, but of making laws. The will of the people, as deliberately expressed by their elected representatives, must, within the limits of the lifetime of a single Parliament, be made effective.” 1910 Age 57

In another passage he claimed freedom for the Government to proceed with Home Rule in the coming Parliament,<sup>1</sup> and repeated its determination to persist with the other measures which had been blocked by the House of Lords. In a lively comment on a letter which Mr. Joseph Chamberlain had written to a Unionist meeting in Birmingham, he charged the Tariff Reformers with having incited the Lords to reject the Budget in furtherance of their campaign. “What,” he asked, “was the reason which Mr. Chamberlain gave for thus advising the Lords?”

“The Budget,” Mr. Chamberlain wrote, “is the last effort of Free Trade finance to find a substitute for Tariff Reform.” There we see the whole motive of this manœuvre unmasked. The Budget was to be rejected at all hazards, at whatever violence to constitutional usage and practice, not because it is a Budget of Socialism and spoliation, but because it provides a substitute, an effective substitute—I will go further and say a destructive substitute—for what is called Tariff Reform.

Finally he summed up the three capital issues which were to be laid before the country as “the absolute control of the Commons over finance, the maintenance of Free Trade, and the effective limitation and curtailment of the legislative powers of the House of Lords.”

It was said after the election that nothing had been decided but the Budget, but the mandate for which Asquith asked in this and other speeches in the course of the campaign covered all issues and sought authority for the curtailment of the legislative as well as the financial powers of the House of Lords, for the passing of Home Rule and all the thwarted Liberal projects of recent years. All through it was in his mind to make clear that the challenge which the Lords had thrown to the Commons could not be disposed of by a mere reversion to the *status quo* before the Budget was rejected, but must be taken up all along the line in the measure in which it had been delivered in the previous years.

The Election, which began on 14th January and continued, according to the custom of that time, for a fortnight, brought the Government back to power by a majority, including the 82 Irish, of 124. It was for all ordinary purposes an ample and generous

<sup>1</sup> “For reasons which I believe to have been adequate, the present Parliament was disabled in advance from proposing any such solution, but in the new House of Commons the hands of a Liberal Government and a Liberal majority will in this matter be entirely free.”

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majority, but it fell considerably short of Liberal hopes. A large reduction of the wholly abnormal majority of 1906 had of course been expected, but scarcely so much as a loss of 104 seats, and Ministers were now faced with the awkward fact that, though they had a clear majority of sixty-three in Great Britain, they would be in an actual minority if the Irish Party voted against them; and that party had taken serious objection to certain features in the Budget and even voted against it on the second reading in the previous Parliament. On the other hand, the result was an even greater disappointment to the Conservative Party, for, in spite of Lord Milner's "damning of the consequences," it is beyond belief that they would have encouraged the peers to risk the dangerous stroke of rejecting the Budget, if they had not felt reasonably sure of carrying the country with them at the subsequent election.

The election over, Asquith rushed away for a few days' rest in the South of France, forgetting in the hurry of his departure that he and his wife had a command invitation to "dine and sleep" at Windsor at the end of January. King Edward was not pleased, and other people commented heavily on the disrespect supposed to have been shown by the Prime Minister to the Sovereign. It needed some diplomacy to explain the circumstances, but the kindly offices of Lord Knollys restored the situation, and the King was pleased to say that he perfectly understood that his Prime Minister must have been "completely knocked up by the election." Asquith was not, in fact, in a state of prostration, but he acknowledged himself to be at fault, wrote a disarming apology from Lord Rendel's villa at Cannes, and, as soon as he got back, went to visit the King at Brighton, where he was now residing. Contrary to some ill-natured gossip which was current at the time, King Edward had a very sincere liking for Asquith, and in spite of the political difficulties of these times, he said more than once that, if any change of political fortunes brought another Government to power, he should on all personal grounds greatly regret the severance of his relations with him.

## II

The Election left both parties disappointed and perplexed. The Opposition had landed themselves and the House of Lords in a dangerous predicament; the Government were by no means sure that they could take advantage of their seemingly large majority in the new situation. Letters from colleagues put the situation to the Prime Minister with frank despondency. It was true—said his

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correspondents—that they had a handsome majority, but this had in it seeds of its own destruction, and the mere fact that it had declined so unhappily from the high-water mark of 1906 might be taken as a sign that the Liberal movement was on the ebb and be held to justify the extremes of obstruction in the hope that it would fail altogether. As for the immediate situation, how was the Budget to be carried if the Irish remained hostile, and how could concessions be made to them without intolerable humiliation? One or two Ministers had been very reluctant converts to the suspensory veto, and were in great doubts about going ahead with it unless House of Lords Reform were undertaken at the same time. But who had any coherent ideas on that subject, and what possibility was there of uniting the Liberal Party on proposals which were avowedly intended to establish a strong second Chamber? From one side the Prime Minister received warnings that the consciences of important people might be strained to breaking point, if he proceeded with Veto without Reform, and from another that he would be betraying the cause and leading the party into a trackless jungle if he committed himself to Reform or let his Veto proposals be in any way tied up with it. In his own mind Veto and Reform were always in separate compartments. With or without Reform the curtailment of the Veto was essential, and no Reform which he ever contemplated was to entail the restoration of the Veto.

Rumours of these internal troubles caused unrest among the faithful, and stiffened the backs of the Irish. It was suggested that in spite of their brave words before the election Ministers meant merely to get the Budget through and then go on as before “ploughing the sands” or—even worse still—getting hopelessly involved in an endless debate on House of Lords Reform. Mr. Redmond used high language in a speech at Dublin on 10th February:

“The Liberal Party had come back to the standard of Gladstone and Home Rule. But in my opinion that is not enough. Every child knew that if Mr. Asquith introduced a Home Rule measure in the new Parliament it would be rejected by the Lords, and the pledge that decided the Irish party to support the Liberal Party was the Prime Minister’s pledge that neither he nor his colleagues would ever assume or retain office again unless they were given assurances that they would be able to curb and limit the veto of the Lords; It is seriously suggested that, having won a victory at the polls against the Lords, Mr. Asquith should send the Budget back to them with a request to be kind enough to pass it into law. To do so would be to give the whole case against the Lords away. To do so would be to disgust every real democrat in Great Britain, and to break openly and unashamedly the clear and explicit pledge on the faith of which, at any rate, Ireland gave her support

1910 to the Government. If Mr. Asquith is not in a position to say that he  
Age 57 has such guarantees as are necessary to enable him to pass a Veto Bill  
this year, and proposes to pass the Budget into law and adjourn the  
veto question, I say that is the policy that Ireland cannot and will not  
approve. . . . I have said nothing to lead the House for a moment to  
imagine that I think Mr. Asquith will not stand to his guns, but I think  
it is my duty to say that if Mr. Asquith stands to his pledges he has  
Ireland united at his back."

The same day (10th February) Asquith reported to the King that Mr. T. P. O'Connor had written to Lord Morley "stating as a certain fact that the Irish party led by Mr. Redmond would vote against the Budget unless they were assured that the passing of a Bill dealing with the Veto of the House of Lords was guaranteed during the present year." "The Cabinet," Asquith told the King, "were of course agreed that no such assurance could or would be given. It is quite possible, therefore, that on the question of the enactment of last year's Budget, the Government may be defeated in the House of Commons by the combined votes of the Unionist and Nationalist parties." This was ominous, but the trouble was by no means confined to the Irish. A few days after the meeting of Parliament (15th February), Sir Charles Dilke brought a deputation of anxious Radicals to the Prime Minister and threatened to set down a motion declaring that the Government had no mandate, from the electorate for any reform of or reconstruction of the House of Lords. On 24th February meetings of Liberal members for Northern and Scottish constituencies passed resolutions in the same sense.

A further complication arose from a misunderstanding of the words which Asquith had used in his Albert Hall speech, and which Mr. Redmond had quoted in his Dublin speech: "We shall not assume office and we shall not hold office unless we can secure the safeguards which experience shows to be necessary for the legislative utility and honour of the party of progress." What he had in mind no doubt was the opening of a *new* chapter of Liberal legislation, while the House of Lords question remained unsettled, but the words were ambiguous, and in some quarters it was assumed that since he was evidently still "holding office" he had obtained what by this time had come to be known as the "guarantees," i.e. a promise from the King that he would, if necessary, create Peers to ensure the acceptance of the Government's policy by the Lords. This situation naturally caused much anxiety to King Edward, who asked to know the intentions of the Government. These were conveyed to him in the following Cabinet minute:

10 DOWNING STREET,  
WHITEHALL, S.W.

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*February 11, 1910.*

His Majesty's Ministers do not propose to advise or request any exercise of the Royal prerogative in existing circumstances, or until they have submitted their plan to Parliament. If in their judgment, it should become their duty to tender any such advice, they would do so when—and not before—the actual necessity may arise.

Further to make the position quite clear Asquith took the first opportunity after Parliament met (21st February) to disabuse his supporters of the idea that he had either asked for or received "guarantees" from the King :

"I tell the House quite frankly that I have received no such guarantee, and that I have asked for no such guarantee. In my judgment it is the duty of responsible politicians in this country, as long as possible and as far as possible, to keep the name of the Sovereign and the prerogatives of the Crown outside the domain of party politics. If the occasion should arise, I should not hesitate to tender such advice to the Crown as in the circumstances the exigencies of the situation appear to warrant in the public interest. But to ask, in advance, for a blank authority, for an indefinite exercise of the Royal Prerogative, in regard to a measure which has never been submitted to, or approved by, the House of Commons, is a request which, in my judgment, no constitutional statesman can properly make, and it is a concession which the Sovereign cannot be expected to grant."

Sound doctrine which, in the circumstances, it was very necessary to affirm, but it came as disillusion and disappointment to a multitude which was looking for immediate spirited action, and the ringing emphasis with which it was stated was too much in the Aristides manner for some tastes. There were cries of disappointment from even loyal members of the Party.

### III

The anxieties of the next few weeks may be read in Asquith's Cabinet letters to the King. "Redmond cold and critical if not avowedly hostile"; "anxiety in the Liberal Party and a good deal of mistrust as to the plans and intentions of the Government." "The situation in many of its aspects precarious, though not immediately dangerous." On 25th February he reports that "in view of the exorbitant demands of Mr. Redmond and his followers, and the impossibility under existing circumstances of counting upon a stable Government majority, certain Ministers were of opinion that

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the wisest and most dignified course for Ministers was at once to tender their resignation to your Majesty.”<sup>1</sup> Others, however, pointed out that “this would be lacking in courage; that the Government was pledged to produce and lay on the table their proposals with regard to the House of Lords and could not honourably retire unless they were defeated in the House of Commons before or upon the disclosure of their plans.” The same day the Chief Whip was instructed to tell Mr. Redmond that the Cabinet were not prepared to give him the assurance for which he asked and that he must act on his responsibility as they would on theirs. So it went on all through March and into April, with Mr. Redmond returning again and again for his assurance and always receiving the same answer. On this point Asquith was immovable. The Budget presented to the new House must in all essentials be the Budget presented to the last House, and there could be no bargaining on that ground. If the Irish really thought it necessary to push their objection to the spirit-duties or their time-honoured grievance against the alleged over-taxation of Ireland to the length of voting against the Budget and ejecting the Government, they must go their own way, and the blood be on their own heads.

At the same time, he was quite willing to meet both Irish and the large number of Liberals and Radicals who now stood on common ground with them in demanding that the rejected Budget should not be sent again to the Lords unless accompanied by a clear intimation of the steps which the House of Commons proposed to take to assert its supremacy as the elective and representative Chamber. In point of fact the King’s Speech at the beginning of the session had mentioned no other subjects but finance and the proposals which, “with all convenient speed,” were to be submitted to “define the relations between the Houses of Parliament so as to secure the undivided authority of the House of Commons over finance and its predominance in legislation”; and if in the very exceptional circumstances, there was a strong opinion in favour of “defining these relations” before re-submitting the rejected Budget to the Lords, Asquith saw no objection. The necessity for some decision was by this time urgent, for the troubles of the Government had come to be known outside, and day after day the Lobby was buzzing with rumours that Ministers were going to find a way out of their difficulties by resigning. In the House itself Asquith was

<sup>1</sup> These hesitations were only a passing phase, for the next day (26th February) he reported the “universal opinion” to be “that there could be no question of immediate or voluntary resignation.”

bombarded with questions which could not be conveniently answered as to the date when the rejected Budget would be re-introduced, and it was in parrying these that he first used the expressions "wait and see," which, torn from its context and applied to circumstances in which he had never used it, was made a reproach to him in later years. It was, as he used it, an almost arrogant warning to an opponent that he must await the speaker's pleasure for the grant of any information :

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Viscount Helmsley : Are we to understand that if the resolutions sent up from this House fail to pass in another place, the circumstances contemplated by the P.M. will have arisen ?

The Prime Minister : We had better wait and see. (Mar. 3, 1910.)

Mr. Peel : Will the contemplated changes (in the Budget) affect the question of Irish finance ?

The Prime Minister : I am afraid that we must wait and see.

Mr. Lonsdale : Will the Rt. hon. gentleman on the motion in respect of the Budget fix a date for the third reading ?

The Prime Minister : The hon. member had better wait and see.

Earl Winterton : Having regard to the natural anxiety of those about to be taxed, can the right hon. gentleman say whether it is possible to give the date (for the introduction of the 1910-11 Budget) before the rising for the spring recess ?

The Prime Minister : I can only repeat the answer which I have already given. The Noble Lord must wait and see. (Ap. 4, 1910.)

While they waited, the Opposition upbraided the Government for "prolonging the financial chaos,"<sup>1</sup> and though the answer to them was the obvious one that they themselves were the principal sinners, the delay was too evidently the result of internal Ministerial difficulties for this explanation to be convincing. The Government was on strong ground in refusing to pick and choose from the rejected Budget the taxes which the Peers approved, and proceed with these alone, and it would also have been on strong ground if it had said firmly from the beginning that it intended to give priority to the

<sup>1</sup> The "financial chaos" was somewhat exaggerated by both parties according to the exigencies of debate. The rejection of the Budget held up the collection of income-tax and super-tax (£23,455,000) and certain other new taxes to the amount of £6,581,000, making in all £30,036,000. The interval was filled by borrowing under the Treasury Temporary Borrowings Act which was passed early in March and the ultimate loss proved to be no more than £1,300,000 (income-tax, £350,000 ; stamps, £600,000 ; interest on borrowing, £350,000). The Opposition protested that the situation ought to be regularised by immediate resolutions in the new Parliament authorising the uncontroversial taxes, but Asquith objected altogether to dividing the Budget into parts which were acceptable and unacceptable to the Lords and giving priority to the former. The rejection of the Budget by the Lords had, moreover, raised a well-founded doubt whether the collection of revenue on the strength of a resolution of the House of Commons alone could be justified in law.



1910 House of Lords resolutions, but the too evident truth for the first  
Age 57 three weeks of the session was that it was not in a position to say anything at all.

For not only the Budget and the action of the Irish, but its House of Lords policy was still a cause of internal trouble. In spite of the fears in the party lest the veto should be tangled up with House of Lords "Reform," influential Ministers, of whom Sir Edward Grey was the chief, were still strongly of opinion that the reconstitution of the Upper House should be undertaken concurrently with the limitation of its veto. Speaking in London on 14th March, Sir Edward said rather pointedly that he was "for a two-Chamber system," and that "to confine ourselves to a single-Chamber issue, and to leave the policy of reform of the Second Chamber—to leave all the ground unoccupied for the other side—would result for us, politically speaking, in disaster, death, and damnation." Sir Edward was represented in after times as having said that single-Chamber government was "disaster, death, and damnation," but he applied these words only to the political consequences to the Liberal Party of leaving the reconstitution of the Second Chamber to its opponents. The majority of his colleagues and practically the entire rank and file of the party were, on the contrary, of opinion that the predicted disaster would surely follow if the question of the veto became involved in the question of reform, and thought it good sense to leave that ground for the present to Lord Lansdowne and Lord Rosebery, the last of whom had for nearly thirty years been appealing to the House of Lords to take up the question of its own reform, though with practically no success. There were moments when resignations threatened on this issue also, but the differences were finally composed on the preamble to the Parliament Bill :

"Whereas it is intended to substitute for the House of Lords as it at present exists a Second Chamber constituted on a popular instead of hereditary basis, but such a substitution cannot immediately be brought into operation : And whereas provision will require hereafter to be made by Parliament in a measure effecting such substitution for limiting and defining the powers of the new Second Chamber, but it is expedient to make such provision as in this Act appears for restricting the existing powers of the House of Lords."

The reconstitution of the Upper House was thus bequeathed as a legacy to any Government or party which might be willing to take it up in the future. None so far has shown any alacrity to do so.

## IV

It was not till the third week of March that the Government were in a position to lay their plans definitely before the House. They now proposed to go ahead immediately with the House of Lords Resolutions, then obtain a first reading for the Parliament Bill, and to take the Budget immediately afterwards. The Resolutions, three in number, dealing respectively with finance, the veto in ordinary legislation, and the duration of Parliaments, were introduced on 29th March, carried by majorities varying from 98 to 106, and disposed of by 14th April, when the Parliament Bill was read a first time.<sup>1</sup>

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The draft of the Bill was sent to King Edward at Biarritz on

<sup>1</sup> The Resolutions were :

## 1. MONEY BILLS

That it is expedient that the House of Lords be disabled by law from rejecting or amending a Money Bill, and that any such limitation by law shall not be taken to diminish or qualify the existing rights and privileges of the House of Commons.

For the purposes of this resolution a Bill shall be considered a Money Bill if, in the opinion of the Speaker, it contains only provisions dealing with all or any of the following subjects, viz., the imposition, repeal, remission, alteration, or regulation of taxation, charges on the Consolidated Fund, or the provision of money by Parliament; Supply; the appropriation, control, or regulation of public money; raising or guaranteeing of any loan or the repayment thereof; or matters incidental to those subjects or any of them.

## 2. BILLS OTHER THAN MONEY BILLS

That it is expedient that the powers of the House of Lords as respects Bills other than Money Bills be restricted by law, so that any such Bill which has passed the House of Commons in three successive Sessions, and having been sent up to the House of Lords at least one month before the end of the Session has been rejected by that House in each of these Sessions, shall become law without the consent of the House of Lords, on the Royal Assent being declared; provided that at least two years shall have elapsed between the date of the first introduction of the Bill in the House of Commons and the date on which it passes the House of Commons for the last time.

For the purposes of this resolution a Bill shall be treated as rejected by the House of Lords if it has not been passed by the House of Lords either without amendment, or with such amendments only as may be agreed upon by both Houses.

## 3. DURATION OF PARLIAMENT

That it is expedient to limit the duration of Parliament to five years.

(The plan adopted was in essentials that put forward by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman in 1907, but there were two variations :

(a) No provision was made, in case of disagreement, for conference between the two Houses.

(b) A Bill was to become law without the consent of the House of Lords if passed by the House of Commons in three successive Sessions, which need not be Sessions of the same Parliament.)

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12th April, and the King acknowledged it in a letter written with his own hand :

*The King to Asquith.*

BIARRITZ.

*April 19, 1910.*

The King has received from the Prime Minister the draft of a Bill to make provision with respect to the powers of the House of Lords in relation to those of the House of Commons and to limit the duration of Parliament.

The King notices that the date of this Bill is the first of this month.

All through the debates on the House of Lords resolutions the fate of the Government was still in doubt, and as late as 13th April Asquith telegraphed to the King's Secretary at Biarritz :

*Asquith to the King.*

"As result of Cabinet during last three days Government have resolved to make no changes in Budget except purely formal ones and refuse demand of Irish for reduced spirit duties. They will ask House of Commons to pass Budget in every substantial respect in the same form in which it was passed in the late House of Commons.

It is possible and not improbable that in consequence of this decision the Irish Party will vote against the Government in the critical division in the closure to the Budget on Monday next. If they do Government will be defeated and crisis of extreme urgency will at once arise."

In the event these misgivings proved groundless, and Asquith was justified in his belief that, when faced with the decision, the Irish would not push their objections to the Budget to the length of voting against it and displacing the Government. That danger, if it ever existed, had passed on 20th April, when the Budget Bill was introduced ; and a week later it had passed through all its stages and was read a third time by a majority of ninety-three, sixty-two of the Irish voting with the Government. The next day (28th April) it was accepted without a division by the House of Lords.

The Government could breathe again, but there was no disguising the fact that it had lost prestige, and Parliament much of its authority through the delays and uncertainties of these months. For some time past it had become only too evident that the January election would not serve for the Parliament Bill as well as the Budget ; and knowing the King's mind, and feeling the insecurity of the position, Asquith had given his supporters a further warning on this subject in the final debate on the House of Lords Resolutions :

"I think it is not only convenient but necessary to give notice to the House and to the country, now that these Resolutions are passing into

the control of other people, of our future intentions. If the Lords fail to accept our policy, or decline to consider it when it is formally presented to the House, we shall feel it our duty immediately to tender advice to the Crown as to the steps which will have to be taken if that policy is to receive statutory effect in this Parliament. What the precise terms of that advice will be, it will, of course, not be right for me to say now, but if we do not find ourselves in a position to ensure that statutory effect will be given to this policy in this Parliament, we shall then either resign our offices or recommend a dissolution of Parliament. And let me add this: that in no case would we recommend Dissolution except under such conditions as will secure that in the new Parliament the judgment of the people as expressed in the election will be carried into law." (House of Commons, 14th April, 1910.)

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The allusion in this statement to "the steps which will have to be taken if that policy is to receive statutory effect in this Parliament" included not only the use of the Royal Prerogative, but the possibility of a Referendum, for that, too, was being discussed by the Cabinet at this time, and in his last letter to the King at Biarritz, Asquith speaks of "a Bill being drafted for that purpose."<sup>1</sup>

Though all the possible alternatives are left open in this statement, it is not difficult to infer from it what would have been the course of events if King Edward's life had been prolonged. Asquith would have acquiesced in the King's view that another reference to the electors was necessary before the Parliament Bill became law, and failing a referendum—which he was willing to explore as a possibility, but very unlikely to have accepted as the actual solution—have asked from King Edward the same understanding that he asked from his successor, viz., that if the electors gave a sufficient majority for the policy, means would be provided to carry it into law. The opinion has been expressed by King Edward's biographer that his son and successor was "constitutionally correct in accepting the advice tendered to him by his Ministers," instead of embarking upon a line of action of which no man could have foreseen the outcome, and all indications suggest that this would have been King Edward's conclusion if he had been called upon to decide the issue. In spite of his opinion that the Government policy was "the destruction of the House of Lords," the King recognised that it would have to go on the Statute-book if beyond all reasonable doubt it had been approved by the electors, but as proof of this he required an election definitely on that policy, after it had been set out in detail and laid before Parliament and the country. In proposing this condition, he must necessarily have led Asquith to suppose that

<sup>1</sup> *Life of King Edward*, p. 710.

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if it were complied with, he would accept the result and, if need be, exercise the Royal prerogative to give effect to it; and that no doubt was what Asquith had in mind when he spoke of "such conditions as will secure that in the new Parliament the judgment of the people as expressed in the election will be carried into law." It may be added that the possibilities of a Referendum were exhaustively discussed with the Opposition leaders at the Constitutional Conference in the summer and autumn of this year, with the result that Asquith was strengthened in his own very decided preference for a General Election as the proper method of consulting the people.

# V

The 1909 Budget having at last been disposed of, the House of Commons took a short holiday, and Asquith put care behind him and went off on a cruise in the Admiralty Yacht *Enchantress* with his friend, Mr. McKenna, the First Lord. His letters to his wife speak of his pleasure and relief:

## *Asquith to his Wife.*

*May 1, 1910.* We are well through the Bay of Biscay, and in sight of the Portuguese coast, and have just finished Morning Service in the open air on deck, Ernest McKenna leading the hymns, in the absence of any other instrument, with cool courage and gusto.

It is impossible to exaggerate the beauty of the sea. We have had blue sky and bright sun since we left Portsmouth on Friday morning. The sea has been roughish most of the way, deep purple in colour with lots of white horses. I have distinguished myself greatly in contrast with the professional seamen by my excellence as a sailor. Out of our whole party only two appeared at the dinner table on Friday night—the Captain and myself; all the McKennas, Admiral Jellicoe, Capt. Troubridge being laid low. The *Enchantress*, though a model of comfort, is not really a good sea-going vessel; she pitches tremendously on small provocation. I have not felt a qualm and am very well situated in Jellicoe's old quarters.

*May 3.* The great pleasure and relief of a trip like this is that we get no news, and one day passes exactly like another. One can always be alone if one pleases. It is quite a peaceful party—even Montagu, whom we shall unship at Cadiz for a bird-nesting expedition, is fairly equable.

*May 4.* I am writing this at sea between Lisbon and Cadiz, where it will be posted this afternoon. We got to Lisbon on Sunday evening after a wonderful voyage. . . . After lunching at the Legation we went to the Palace to see the King and the Queen-Mother, to whom Pamela and Barbara<sup>1</sup> were presented; and in the evening McKenna and I went again to the Palace to dinner with the King and a lot of Portuguese so-called

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Reginald McKenna and her sister.

"statesmen." I sat next the Queen who is still handsome, and, like all the Orleans family, quite good company. She urged me strongly to go and see a bull-fight, but to go incognito. I said I would if she could give me a mantilla for concealment. So the next morning she sent me a beautiful specimen which arouses the envy of the two girls and which I will make over to you. 1910 Age 57

Lisbon, though beautifully situated, is at close quarters an ugly and uninteresting town. But nothing can be more beautiful than Cintra, where we spent the best part of yesterday. The King lent us a couple of motors, and we drove out about 17 miles, saw the sights and lunched with old Villiers, who has a house there, and afterwards walked about the grounds of Monserrate, supposed to be the most remarkable garden in Europe. . . . We left Lisbon about dinner-time and have been steaming along all night. The sea is quite smooth and the sun shines all day. To-night and to-morrow (Thursday) we shall sleep at Seville and then return to the Yacht, which will take us to Malaga for Grenada. We are a very harmonious and peaceful party.

This plan was not to be. He has himself related what followed :

"At King Edward's request, we put in at Lisbon to pay our respects to King Manoel of Portugal and the Queen-Mother. The last communication I had from my revered Sovereign was a telegram sent two days before his death : 'Very glad that you liked your stay at Lisbon and that the King was so pleasant. Edward R.'

We had passed Cadiz and were nearing Gibraltar, when the First Lord and I received by wireless our first intimation of the King's illness.<sup>1</sup> Lord Knollys's message to me was of a disquieting kind : 'Deeply regret to say the King's condition is now most critical.' On our arrival a few hours later at Gibraltar I at once gave instructions for our immediate return, and on Friday, May 6, I telegraphed to Lord Knollys as follows :

'Your telegram received. Am starting at once for home. I find that we can make journey quicker by sea than by land. In half an hour *Enchantress* will be under weigh for Plymouth, where I hope to be Monday night. Please convey my most fervent sympathy and hopes to Queen and Prince of Wales. We shall be in constant telegraph contact by wireless throughout. Please keep me constantly informed.'

At three o'clock in the morning of the following day (May 7) I received by wireless the terrible news of the King's death : 'I am deeply grieved to inform you that my beloved father the King passed away peacefully at a quarter to twelve to-night (the 6th). George.'

I went up on deck, and I remember well that the first sight that met my eyes in the twilight before dawn was Halley's comet blazing in the sky. It was the only time, I believe, that any of us saw it during the voyage. I felt bewildered and indeed stunned. At a most anxious moment in the fortunes of the State, we had lost, without warning or preparation, the Sovereign whose ripe experience, trained sagacity, equitable judgment, and unvarying consideration, counted for so much.

<sup>1</sup> Among others Mrs. Asquith had sent a wireless message through the Admiralty begging her husband to return immediately.

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For two years I had been his Chief Minister, and I am thankful to remember that from first to last I never concealed anything from him. He soon got to know this, and in return he treated me with a gracious frankness which made our relationship in very trying and exacting time, one, not always of complete agreement, but of unbroken confidence. It was this that lightened the load which I should otherwise have found almost intolerably oppressive: the prospect that, in the near future, I might find it my duty to give him advice which I knew would be in a high degree unpalatable.

Now he had gone. His successor, with all his fine and engaging qualities, was without political experience. We were nearing the verge of a crisis almost without example in our constitutional history. What was the right thing to do? This was the question which absorbed my thoughts as we made our way, with two fast escorting cruisers, through the Bay of Biscay, until we landed at Plymouth on the evening of Monday, May 9." (*Fifty Years of Parliament*, pp. 86-8).

The next day he had his first audience with the new King, and, as his wife records, "came away deeply moved by his modesty and good sense." On the 11th he had an audience with Queen Alexandra, who received him with the intimate affection of old friendship, and took him into the death-chamber. Then he came straight to the House of Commons and moved the vote of condolence in a speech which was judged to be a perfect model of the *éloge* of such an occasion:

"King Edward," he said, "was animated every day of his Sovereignty by the thought that he was at once the head and the chief servant of the vast organism which we call the British Empire. He recognised in the fullest degree both the powers and limitations of a Constitutional Monarchy. . . . He loved his people at home and over the seas. Their interests were his interests, and their fame his fame. He had no self apart from them."

After the King's funeral the cruise was resumed, and the party now went via Pembroke Dock to Greenock and thence to Skye. "It is very peaceful," writes Asquith, "and I spend most of the day alone reading, or writing at a long memorandum which I am preparing for the King."

## VI

The Emperor William came to London for the funeral of King Edward on 23rd May, and telegraphed to his Chancellor, Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg, a long summary of his impressions, founded, he said, on "many talks with his relatives, with gentlemen of the Court, with certain old acquaintances, and many distinguished persons." The general conclusion, he says, is "somewhat as follows:

People's minds are wholly occupied with the internal situation and its insecure future. The outlook all round is black. The Government is thoroughly hated. It is impossible to find words strong enough to express what is felt about the character of the Ministry. For the present no one sees any way out. It is reported with satisfaction that in the days after the King's death and during the lying-in-state the Prime Minister and other of his colleagues were publicly hissed in the streets, and that expressions like 'you have killed the King' were heard. A demonstration against the Government is looked for during the great mourning and funeral ceremonies, and a strong reaction in a Conservative sense is thought not improbable." The Emperor added that he heard from intimate sources that Sir Edward Grey was weak as wax in the hands of Isvolsky and would do whatever he prescribed.<sup>1</sup>

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We may wonder at the frankness with which those whom he met conveyed their opinions to the German Emperor, but there is no doubt that this document depicts truthfully the state of feeling which from this time onwards was more and more to embitter British politics and to produce abroad the misleading impression that Great Britain was too much occupied with her internal difficulties to play an important part in foreign affairs. All and more than all the wrath that was poured out on Mr. Gladstone in former days was now discharged upon Asquith and his colleagues. There were, as the Emperor said, no words strong enough to characterise their iniquities. They were said to be aiming at property and the throne, disrupting the Empire and threatening religion. Old friendships were broken; men and women in different political camps could no longer be relied upon to meet amicably on neutral ground; malicious stories were circulated and believed about the private characters and habits of distinguished men. When to all this there was added the spectacle of Suffragettes breaking windows and burning churches, and a little later of eminent lawyers and statesmen arming and drilling an army to resist an Act of Parliament, it was scarcely surprising if some foreign Governments concluded that Great Britain had lost her ancient sobriety and self-control and was entering upon a period of civil strife which would enfeeble her for all other purposes.

In spite of the information which the Kaiser thought worth cabling to his Chancellor, the much-hated Government had five months earlier obtained a large majority at a General Election, and eight months later was to receive the same measure of confidence.

<sup>1</sup> Official German Documents (*Grosse Politik*), Vol. XXVIII, p. 328.



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Neither Asquith nor his colleagues were ever hissed in the streets ; there were no demonstrations against the Government during the days of the King's lying-in-state and funeral, and there was no Conservative reaction afterwards. Whether Asquith or Grey were wax in the hands of Isvolsky can be judged by what has been recorded in a previous chapter. In spite of malicious rumours to the contrary, the intimate and affectionate relations which Queen Alexandra maintained with Asquith to the end of her life would be sufficient disproof, if any were needed, of the suggestion that he failed in respect or consideration for the King in the difficult circumstances in which both were placed.

From the day when he kissed hands in 1908 until 28th April, 1910, when he paid his farewell visit to the King, they never had more than passing disagreements ; and in his many visits to Sandringham and Windsor he was able to keep the King's attention upon more than affairs of State. He made a point of informing him—either personally or through his friend Lord Knollys—of all that was happening at home and abroad. Neither the King nor the Queen was moved by the abuse showered upon Asquith at that time, and if anything his position was strengthened by these attacks. It was said of Mr. Gladstone that the enthusiasm for him always rose a little higher than the antagonism to him. Asquith never kindled the enthusiasm of crowds, as Mr. Gladstone did. In the same way as legally he was more effective before a cultured tribunal than a jury, so his appeal was more to the respect than to the Hurrahs ! of his audience. But the known staunchness of his character and sobriety of his methods secured him a steady support from quiet people which was of the highest value in these times.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONFERENCE

The Party Truce and the Constitutional Conference—A suggested "National Government"—Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Balfour—Constitution-making and its difficulties—Points of divergence—Breakdown of the Conference—Reasons for failure—Lord Morley's resignation of the India Office—Mr. Haldane's Peerage. J. A. S.

WHEN Parliament reassembled in the second week of June Asquith 1910 and his colleagues had come to certain conclusions. To use his own Age 57-58 words, the death of the King had "completely transformed the political situation." He was always sensitive to these occasions, and the idea of plunging the country back into the bitter and violent controversies of the previous months and perhaps being under the necessity of pressing the new King to difficult and painful decisions within a few weeks of his coming to the throne and during the period of mourning, was deeply repugnant to him. He, therefore, with the hearty approval of the King and of his own colleagues, approached Mr. Balfour and proposed a Conference between party leaders on the questions that divided them. Mr. Balfour agreed, and together they mapped out the ground which should be the subject of discussion. No strict boundaries were drawn, but in general the questions were defined as :

1. The relations of the two Houses in regard to finance.
2. Provision of some machinery to deal with persistent disagreement between the two Houses, whether by limitation of veto, joint sitting, referendum or otherwise.
3. The possibility of coming to some agreement as to such a change in the composition and numbers of the Second House as would ensure that it would act and be regarded as acting, fairly between the great parties in the State.

The Conference met for the first time in the Prime Minister's room in the House of Commons on 17th June, the Government being represented by Asquith, Mr. Lloyd George, Lord Crewe, and Mr. Birrell, and the Unionist Party by Mr. Balfour, Lord Lansdowne,

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Mr. Austen Chamberlain, and Lord Cawdor. Twelve meetings were held between that date and the end of July, some of them on consecutive days. It was stipulated that the proceedings should be strictly private and confidential, and except for one leakage towards the end of July, which drew a sharp comment from the Prime Minister, this condition was well observed. But nothing could prevent a certain restiveness in both parties, and the hotter partisans in each made no secret of their fears that coalitions might be arranged, or principles and positions that they held vital be bargained away in this secret conclave. Mr. Birrell endeavoured to reassure his constituents :

“ One observation I will allow myself and one only. It is this—that any Conference that may be taking place is not between Popes or Plenipotentiaries ; it is not between those who can bind or loose, or between those who can sign, seal and deliver. Therefore do not be agitated ; there is no need to be agitated. The notion that anybody would meet round a table to try to discover compromises or invent them is unreasonable and ridiculous. The object of any conference must be to discover agreement, how much agreement there is, how far it goes, to what it extends, how far it will carry. It is obviously the duty of any persons engaged in any such task as this not to invent compromises but to discover agreement ; and then, if discovery is not made, or if it is unsatisfactory, I assure you all, the most enthusiastic politician amongst you, that you will find yourselves relegated to your former positions, with all your rights preserved and able to fight as hard, and I hope as vigorously, with as much good sense and as much information as before, when the time comes.”<sup>1</sup>

Asquith himself has characterised the Conference as “ an honest and continuous effort ” extending over the best part of six months to arrive at a settlement, and at one time there were reasonable hopes of its success. On 29th July, just before Parliament rose, he gave a moderately optimistic report of progress up to that point :

“ The representatives of the Government and the Opposition have held twelve meetings, and have carefully surveyed a large part of the field of controversy, and the result is that our discussions have made such progress, although we have not so far reached an agreement, as to render it, in the opinion of all of us, not only desirable but necessary that they should continue. In fact I may go farther, and say that we should think it wrong at this stage to break them off. There is no question of their indefinite continuance, and if we find as a result of our further deliberations during the recess that there is no prospect of an agreement that can be announced to Parliament in the course of the present session, we shall bring the Conference to a close.”

It was proposed that the Conference should meet during the

<sup>1</sup> Speech at Bristol, 24th June, 1910.

summer at Lord Crewe's country house, but Lord Lansdowne strongly objected to this, and the form of his objection shows that even at this period the Unionist leaders were far less sanguine of success than Asquith appears to have been at this time :

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"It would at once," he wrote, "he said that the whole affair was a picnic and that business of such importance ought not to be transacted in an environment of such a kind. Supposing, on the other hand, that *per impossibile* we were to arrive at an agreement, it is bound to contain a number of points which will meet with criticism at the hands of our friends. Will not that criticism be much more severe, if it can be said that we had been 'softened' by the excellence of Crewe's champagne and the other attractions of a hospitable and luxurious country house?"<sup>1</sup>

## II

There was, in fact, very little softening on the Unionist side, though "cheerfulness continued to break in," as Dr. Johnson's friend said, till very nearly the end on the Liberal side. During the autumn lively seekers after new things leapt ahead to the formation of a Coalition Government to give effect to the conclusions of the Conference, and by so doing caused not a little anxiety to good party men. Mr. Lloyd George, anticipating his later self, was supposed to be keen on the idea of a "National Government," and Mr. Balfour by no means discouraging. In the obituary notice of Lord Balfour, published after his death in *The Times* (20th March, 1930), it was explicitly stated that "a common programme of a Ministry was laid down, Mr. Asquith being excluded." "Balfour, however," it was added, "declined participation in the intrigue." It may be stated with confidence that Asquith believed himself to have been fully informed of all that was going on, and he was certainly aware that Mr. Lloyd George was conferring with Mr. Balfour. For himself he was wholly sceptical about any Coalition being possible which would have effected the desired objects of settling the House of Lords question and carrying the Home Rule Bill and other controversial measures by consent, and he would certainly not have been willing to pay the price (Compulsory Military Service, Imperial Preference, etc.) which, according to rumours current at the time, the Tory leaders would have required for their connivance. He thought the ground treacherous and dangerous for both parties, but with his accustomed tolerance, he was willing to let those who thought otherwise try their hand and he watched the progress of the business to its inevitable conclusion with a certain detached amusement. The

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Lansdowne*, p. 401.

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"programme," if such it could be called, appears not to have excluded Asquith, but on the contrary to have proceeded on the basis that in any division of offices between Liberals and Unionists, his supersession as Prime Minister should be ruled out. So Mr. Lloyd George assured him, and his position at this time was such that the idea of excluding him from a combination which looked to the support of the House of Commons could not have occurred to any practical politician.<sup>1</sup>

In his *Memories and Reflections* Asquith has left one brief record of the scene from within :

"Much documentary material was provided for the conference on the subject of the working of bicameral systems in other countries, and of the referendum and other plebiscitary expedients. The feasibility of a joint session of the two Chambers in cases of difference between them, and if so under what conditions, was also a topic which was fully considered. The conference heard oral evidence from two, and according to my memory only two, witnesses. One of them was Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, President of Columbia University in the State of New York, a conspicuous and distinguished figure in the educational and the political life of the United States. The other was Mr. Fielding, who had probably a longer experience than any man then living of the practical working of the constitution of the Dominion of Canada and its Provinces. He told us that in the course of his public life he had been at one time continuously in office—Dominion and Provincial—for no less than twenty-five years.

We should have been glad, if it had been possible, to have had first-hand testimony from witnesses of equal authority as to the experience of the States which form the Commonwealth of Australia, and whose constitutional history presents several cases of conflict on critical matters between the Upper and Lower Houses of the Legislature." (*Memories and Reflections*, Vol. I, pp. 200-1.)

A fuller account, which includes a memorandum addressed by Lord Lansdowne to Mr. Balfour at the beginning of September, is to be found in Lord Newton's *Life of Lord Lansdowne*.<sup>2</sup> The Unionists proposed to divide legislation into three categories, ordinary, financial, and constitutional, and stood out for separate consideration and treatment of each category, the last being reserved

<sup>1</sup> Evidence of Asquith's position at this time may be found in a letter written to him by Mr. Haldane at the end of the Session of 1910 (30th June, 1910) :

"The Session is over and it is possible to take stock. One thing is very clear. Your personal position is very distinctly strengthened. Both in the Cabinet and in Parliament and in the country this is noticeably so. Moreover, if anything happened to you, the Ministry would at once break up. So that, both from a personal point of view and as regards work done, I think you have every reason to look back with satisfaction on the months just passed away."

<sup>2</sup> P. 396 *et seq.*



The King has received  
from the Prime Minister  
the "Draft of a Bill - do -"  
"make provision with respect"  
"to the House of the House of"  
"Lords in relation to those"  
"of the House of Commons"  
"and do bring the attention"  
"of Parliament -"

The King notices that  
the date of the Bill is  
the first of this month!

Respectfully  
April 9-1910.



for Referendum before they finally became law. On finance they offered to surrender the right of the House of Lords to reject money Bills, provided the House of Commons consented to limit the scope of measures withdrawn from its control on the ground that they were financial. Though the difficulties of definition were very great, some approach to agreement was made on this subject. When it came to the other categories, the obstacles proved insurmountable. It was agreed that on ordinary legislation the procedure should be by joint sittings, but no agreement could be reached as to what questions should be "ordinary" and what "constitutional," or in what numbers respectively the two Houses should be represented at the joint sittings. It was, in fact, very difficult, if not impossible, to decide the last of these questions until the question of the House of Lords "reform," upon which opinion in all parties was deeply divided, had been settled. Lord Newton admits that the question of Home Rule was mainly in the minds of the Unionist members of the Conference when they spoke of "constitutional questions," but when efforts were made to meet them on this ground, they required that not only Home Rule but all questions "affecting the machinery by which legislation was turned out," should be treated as "constitutional." Upon that point Asquith expressed a firm opinion to Mr. Balfour :

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*Asquith to Mr. Balfour.*

10 DOWNING STREET,

WHITEHALL, S.W.

My colleagues in the Conference agree with me that it might save time and conduce to clearness to-morrow, if I send you a brief summary of the conclusions at which, after careful consultation, we have arrived.

We regard the concession which we have provisionally agreed to in respect of Finance as of the most substantial character, and extremely difficult for us to defend against the criticism of our own supporters.

To defend it at all would we feel become an impossibility if it were accompanied by the exclusion from the new machinery for preventing deadlocks on what is called organic or constitutional legislation.

The distinction now suggested is entirely unknown to our Constitution : it discriminates between legislative projects on the ground not of their real importance and the seriousness of their consequences, but according as they do or do not touch the law-making machinery ; and it would render the new system totally inapplicable to a large number of the proposed changes to which our supporters attach the greatest value, and in respect to which deadlocks are most likely to occur.

We are prepared to deal specially with the case of Home Rule on the lines of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's suggestion.



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But we do not feel that we can maintain our weakened position in regard to Finance unless (a) the new machinery is made applicable to all legislation and (b) we can come to a satisfactory agreement in regard to the interpretation of X."<sup>1</sup>

### III

Before October was far advanced the Conference was in deep waters, and on the 14th Asquith wrote to the King :

#### *Asquith to the King.*

"Mr. Asquith, with his humble duty, has the honour to report to your Majesty that the Conference on the Constitutional questions has met four times this week and to-day adjourned for a fortnight.

Mr. Asquith regrets to say that the prospect of agreement is not so favourable as it appeared to be at the beginning of the week. But he has not altogether abandoned the hope that some *modus evendi* may yet be discovered.

The point of divergence which has been reached is the question whether organic and constitutional changes (such e.g. as Home Rule, the franchise, redistribution) should be excepted from the procedure of joint sessions, which, it is agreed, should be applicable to deadlocks between the two Houses, in regard to ordinary legislation ; and should (in cases of such difference) be submitted to a popular *referendum ad hoc*.

The representatives of the Opposition insist on this distinction ; the representatives of the Government are opposed to it, not only on its merits, but because they know that it would be quite impossible to induce the Liberal Party to agree to it."

The King replied on the same day :

#### *The King to Asquith.*

MARLBOROUGH HOUSE.

October 14, 1910.

MY DEAR MR. ASQUITH,

I am much concerned by what you tell me has happened at to-day's meeting of the Conference. I quite recognise that the point of divergence, which has now been reached, is a most critical one. But I am comforted to a certain extent by your saying that you still hope a way out of the difficulties may be found. I know how you are all animated by an earnest wish to arrive at a settlement, and I trust that the adjournment for a fortnight may conduce to that end. . . .

Asquith communicated this letter to all the members of the Conference, and the effort to reach an agreement was continued for another three weeks. On 8th November he made a further communication to the King :

<sup>1</sup> X, the symbol used for "Constitutional questions" or "questions of great gravity."

*Asquith to the King.*

10 DOWNING STREET.

Nov. 8.

To-day's meeting of the Conference brought matters to a head. The 1910 proposed exclusion from the new machinery for settling deadlocks of Home Rule and other so-called organic changes was exhaustively discussed. The result showed an apparently irreconcilable divergence of view. But it was agreed that each side should carefully review in consultation the whole situation. A further, and possibly a final, meeting will be held to-morrow. Age 57-58

There were two more meetings before the end.

"It will be a disappointment if we fail," he wrote to his wife on November 10, "but nobody's fault. We all agree that A. J. B. (Mr. Balfour) is head and shoulders above his colleagues. I had a rather intimate talk with him before the Conference this morning. He is very pessimistic about the future, and evidently sees nothing for himself but chagrin and a possible private life."

We may sum the matter up by saying that what the Conference had been attempting was nothing less than to convert the immemorial unwritten into a written constitution—a task which would in any case have been one of enormous difficulty, and certainly could not be achieved by men who were deeply committed on one side or other in the controversies of the hour. Both parties had in mind certain great impending questions—especially Home Rule for Ireland—on which the one desired to remove obstructions and the other to block the way. No one had better reasons for desiring a settlement than Asquith, but there came a point at which he felt constrained to say that he could not justify to his supporters the concessions which he was asked to make, if the machinery for settlement between the two Houses was not to apply to the questions in which they were most interested.

#### IV

At the end of October this year, Lord Morley handed in his resignation as Secretary of State for India, and, honestly believing that he wished to take his discharge from office and public affairs, Asquith accepted it. It is extremely doubtful whether Lord Morley really desired to quit the India Office, and he certainly did not wish to quit the Government. From the beginning of the Campbell-Bannerman Government he had spoken of having "banished myself to the Brahmaputra"; and in the early days he gave

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repeated hints that he would not remain long in that exile, that there was a certain "compact" by which he was to obtain release, and that a "vacant stool" in the Cabinet must shortly be expected. Campbell-Bannerman was at first a good deal troubled by these intimations, but, while denying the "compact," he replied with charming letters of persuasion and appeasement, and everything went on as before. Asquith was a little less understanding about Lord Morley's moods and tempers, and his prompt acceptance of the proffered resignation caused surprise and disappointment. I was myself the means of bringing to Asquith's knowledge what I believed to be in Lord Morley's mind, and it was a race against time to intercept him before the hour fixed for what was to have been their farewell interview. It was managed with ten minutes to spare. Asquith was firm against re-opening the door of the India Office; that "vacant stool" had been filled by the appointment of Lord Crewe, and on no account would he go back on that. But another door was fortunately open, and a few days later Lord Morley walked through it, and re-entered the Cabinet as Lord President of the Council. The incident is recorded in a letter from Asquith to his wife:

*Asquith to his Wife.*

Nov. 1, 1910.

I have seen a string of people including J. M., whose vanity has been wounded by the supposed readiness with which I accepted his resignation of the India Office, as though it meant his complete retirement from the Cabinet. We had a very agreeable interview, in the course of which I stroked him down, and in the end I have little doubt that he will stay on in some light office such as President of the Council.

In the next few months Lord Morley did more and more varied administrative work than at any time in his life. When Lord Crewe fell ill at the beginning of 1911, he went back to his old Department and carried on for six months, showing none of the weariness of which he had spoken despondently in the previous October. He also sat in the Committee of Imperial Defence, and on occasions even took the chair, and when Sir Edward Grey went on holiday he filled his place at the Foreign Office, and, it may be said incidentally, discovered more of the tendencies which he afterwards denounced. In addition to all else, he took charge of the Parliament Bill in the House of Lords during Lord Crewe's absence through illness, as will be related in another chapter. But he was in some respects a rather uneasy colleague in these months, and he caused Asquith some anxiety by repeated hints that his conscience might not permit him

to consent to the creation of Peers if that proved to be the necessary means of resistance of the House of Lords. He was always difficult to understand on this subject. He was strongly in favour of the Parliament Act and of the Irish policy for which it paved the way, and he could suggest no alternative means of giving effect to either if the House of Lords blocked the way, but ardently as he desired the end he seemed up to the last moment to shrink from the means.

Early in the following year it was decided that Mr. Haldane who by now had finished the chief part of his work of military reorganisation, should go to the House of Lords, where an access of debating strength on the Liberal benches was greatly needed. Asquith wrote to his wife on this occasion :

*Asquith to his Wife.*

10 DOWNING STREET.

*Mar. 21, 1911.*

I have just done what I never in this life expected to do—sent a submission to the King that the dignity of a Viscount of the United Kingdom be conferred on the Rt. Hon. R. B. Haldane, Secretary of State for War, with the title of Viscount Haldane of Cloan in the County of Perth.

When I think of the days when we sat on a Sunday afternoon in the little garden of Eton House at Hampstead—two quite briefless barristers with no apparent or conjecturable future—it is a landmark of what may happen in this strange country. A pretty good specimen of what the novelists and critics call Romance.

Eighteen months later the romance was completed by Lord Haldane's elevation to the Lord Chancellorship.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE ROYAL PREROGATIVE

The decision to dissolve—Asquith at Sandringham—His conversation with the King—The Cabinet Memorandum to the King—Asquith and Lord Crewe at Buckingham Palace—The “Hypothetical Understanding”—The Parliament Bill in the House of Lords—A “Death-bed Repentance”—The December Election—Home Rule an issue.

J. A. S.

1910  
Age 58

It had been understood between parties that the failure of the Conference would restore the *status quo* at the time of King Edward's death, and this meant for the Government taking up the question of the House of Lords with his successor at the point at which it had been suspended by that event. What that point was it is important to bear in mind. King Edward had notified that he should require a second election before using his prerogative to overcome the opposition of the House of Lords to the Parliament Bill, and Asquith had steered his course accordingly. But he had naturally taken for granted that, if he complied with King Edward's condition and the result was decisive, the use of the prerogative, if needed, would follow as a matter of course. It now became necessary to ascertain whether his son and successor would accept the same test, and act, as presumably his father would have done, in like circumstances.

There was for the Minister only one other possible course, as he saw the situation—that he himself should resign and throw upon the Opposition the onus of dealing with the situation, if they could. He was prepared for this in the last resort, but he considered it the worst of all solutions for reasons which he explained to the House of Commons in the following year :

“If we had resigned, the King, I have no doubt, would have sent for the right hon. gentleman opposite, the Leader of the Opposition, who might or might not have undertaken the responsibility of forming a Government. If he had not, of course matters would have remained just as they were. If he had, it was a matter of common knowledge that a Government so formed could not have existed for a week in the then House of Commons for the simple but sufficient reason that the House would have refused to grant supplies. A Dissolution, therefore, was inevitable, and there was no ground whatsoever for thinking that a

Dissolution would not have been attended by the same result ; but— 1910  
and I ask the particular attention of the House and the country to this— Age 58  
a Dissolution under these circumstances would have made it almost  
impossible to keep the name and authority of the King out of the arena  
of electoral controversy.”<sup>1</sup>

A dissolution being necessary in either event, his one thought was how to hold it and make it decisive without involving the Crown in the electoral struggle.

This was what was most in his mind when he decided that—subject to an understanding with the King—the Election should be held at once, i.e. before Christmas. No one could be more resolute when his mind was made up, but for some days he had to fight hard for this decision. There were waverers and doubters within the party, and some of the astutest electioneers predicted disaster if a second election were inflicted on the country within twelve months. Tactics apart, the only reasonable doubt was whether the Parliament Bill should be passed through all its stages in the House of Commons and the crisis deferred until it had been rejected by the House of Lords, probably in the following spring ; but to Asquith that seemed a pure waste of time, and an unnecessary duplication of the controversy, which would in any case be renewed in the new Parliament. The Bill had been read a first time and was before the country ; the resolutions on which it was founded and which contained everything material that was in it had been exhaustively debated ; the proposals of the Government were simple and intelligible and known to everybody in principle and in detail. The Conference had explored all the possibilities of agreed settlement with wholly negative results. These things taken together seemed to Asquith to constitute a complete fulfilment of the conditions preliminary to a dissolution which could reasonably be asked for by the Crown for the exercise of the constitutional last resort, and he saw no advantage in going over the ground again until he was assured that the result would be decisive.

All these were good reasons, but once more the final consideration which clinched the matter in his mind was that if the election were postponed until there had been another clash in Parliament between the two Houses, the action of the King must have been a subject of public controversy. Partisans would have demanded to know whether the “ guarantees ” had been given, and the answer could hardly have been kept back or the Sovereign shielded from criticism, however correct or constitutional his conduct might have

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons, 7th August, 1911.

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been. But an immediate election kept this issue in the distance. It might be assumed that the Prime Minister would not have recommended a dissolution without obtaining an understanding from the King, but the question was unlikely to be asked before a crisis had arisen in Parliament, and, if it was asked, Ministers would be on the strongest ground in refusing to answer all questions in advance of the necessity.

## II

These reasons prevailed, and at its meeting on 10th November the Cabinet decided to ask for an immediate dissolution, and authorised Asquith to report to that effect to the King. He went on the following day to Sandringham, and has left a record of what he said to the King :

*Conversation at Sandringham, 11th November, 1910.*

"Mr. Asquith pointed out that this would be second time in the course of twelve months that the question of the relations between the two Houses had been submitted to the electorate. It was necessary, therefore, that in the event of the Government obtaining an adequate majority in the New House of Commons, the matter should be put in train for final settlement. This could only be brought about (if the Lords were not ready to give way) by the willingness of the Crown to exercise its prerogative to give effect to the will of the nation. The House of Lords cannot be dissolved and the only legal way in which it can be brought into harmony with the other House is by either curtailing or adding to its members. In theory, the Crown might conceivably adopt the former course by withholding writs of summons. But this has not been done for many centuries ; it would be most invidious in practice ; and it is at least doubtful whether it can be said to be constitutional. On the other hand the prerogative of creation is undoubted ; it has never been recognised as having any constitutional limit ; it was used for this very purpose in the 18th century, and agreed to be used on a large scale by King William IV in 1832. There could, in Mr. Asquith's opinion, be no doubt that the knowledge that the Crown was ready to use the prerogative would be sufficient to bring about an agreement without any necessity for its actual exercise."

For the moment Asquith contented himself with stating the case and left it for consideration.

The Cabinet met again on the morning of 15th November and drew up a memorandum which was forwarded to the King (who had now returned from Sandringham) on the afternoon of the same day :

"The Cabinet has very carefully considered the situation created by the failure of the Conference, in view of the declaration of policy made, on their behalf by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons on the 14th April, 1910.

The advice which they feel it their duty to tender to H.M. is as follows : 1910

An immediate dissolution of Parliament—as soon as the necessary Age 58 parts of the Budget, the provision of old age pensions, and one or two other matters have been disposed of. The House of Lords to have the opportunity, if they demand it, at the same time, but not so as to postpone the date of the dissolution, to discuss the Government Resolutions. H.M. Ministers cannot, however, take the responsibility of advising a dissolution, unless they may understand that in the event of the policy of the Government being approved by an adequate majority in the new House of Commons, H.M. will be ready to exercise his constitutional powers (which may involve the prerogative of creating Peers) if needed, to secure that effect shall be given to the decision of the country.

H.M. Ministers are fully alive to the importance of keeping the name of the King out of the sphere of party and electoral controversy. They take upon themselves, as is their duty, the entire and exclusive responsibility for the policy which they will place before the electorate. H.M. will doubtless agree that it would be inadvisable in the interest of the State that any communication of the intentions of the Crown should be made public unless and until the actual occasion should arise.”

15th November, 1910.

The following day (16th November) Asquith, accompanied by Lord Crewe,<sup>1</sup> went to Buckingham Palace at three in the afternoon<sup>2</sup> and saw the King. What they had to say was in substance what had been said in the memorandum. The Government could not remain in office and see their policy thwarted by the House of Lords, and they could not advise a dissolution—the second within twelve months—unless they had reasonable assurance that if a sufficient majority was obtained for their policy the King would, if necessary, use his prerogative to overcome the resistance of the House of Lords.

“I have never seen the King to better advantage,” Asquith wrote the same evening, “he argued well and showed no obstinacy.” There were moments when the result seemed in doubt, but what decided it was that no argument could reveal any other course than that proposed for either the King or his Ministers. Describing the

<sup>1</sup> Though Asquith was unaware of it, there was some criticism at the time of his having taken Lord Crewe with him to this interview, “as if,” it was said, “he needed a witness of what passed.” No such idea ever entered his head. He asked Lord Crewe to accompany him as leader of the House of Lords, which was deeply concerned in the question of policy, and perhaps also as the one among his colleagues who had known the King personally all his life. In arranging the interview with the King’s Secretary, Lord Knollys, he had said that he proposed to bring Lord Crewe with him.

<sup>2</sup> It was characteristic of Asquith that just before what he described at the time as “the most important political occasion in his life,” he faithfully kept a promise to be present at the wedding of Mr. Amery and Miss Greenwood, which took place at 2.30 the same day, and went on from the wedding to the Palace.



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Age 58 occasion in the House of Commons in the following year,<sup>1</sup> Asquith said simply :

“ His Majesty, after careful consideration of all the circumstances past and present, and after discussing the matter in all its bearings with myself and with my noble friend and colleague, Lord Crewe, felt that he had no alternative but to assent to the advice of the Cabinet.”

The words were carefully chosen, and he always maintained that they were an exact and constitutionally correct account of what happened. The King, however, did insist that the Parliament Bill should be submitted to the House of Lords before the Election, a condition with which Asquith readily complied.<sup>2</sup> It was agreed that the King's decision should be kept strictly secret and the utmost effort be made by Ministers to keep his name out of the Election, and, unless the necessity of disclosing it arose, out of the subsequent debates in Parliament.

The Cabinet met later in the afternoon of the 16th, and heard from Asquith the result of this interview.

Though the point may seem a fine one, Asquith always objected to the use of the word “ guarantee ” as expressing what he asked from the King in November 1911. He spoke of it as a “ hypothetical understanding ” that if he took the responsibility of advising another election, the King would regard the issue as having been fairly presented, and in the event of the result being sufficiently favourable to the Government, use the constitutional last resort to prevent its being stultified in the subsequent Parliament. In the description of the interview which he gave in the following year to the House of Lords, Lord Crewe said :

“ It is altogether inaccurate—and I might use a stronger phrase—to say that at that time we asked His Majesty for guarantees. The question whether at any time the advice to create Peers should be given must necessarily depend for one thing upon the adequacy of the majority with which we were returned to the House of Commons, assuming that we were returned at all.”<sup>3</sup>

### III

Further discussion on this subject must be deferred until we come to the events of the following year, but it may be briefly recorded here that in the interval between the announcement of the dissolution and the prorogation of Parliament, the House of Lords had

<sup>1</sup> Vote of Censure, House of Commons, 7th August, 1911.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Lansdowne*, Memorandum of conversation with the King, p. 410. “ H. M. observed that it was owing to him that we had been allowed to have the Parliament Bill in the House of Lords at all.”

<sup>3</sup> House of Lords, 8th August, 1911.

what was afterwards called a death-bed repentance. For when, as arranged with the King, the Parliament Bill was presented to it, instead of discussing this Bill in detail, Lord Lansdowne moved the adjournment of the debate on the second reading in order to bring forward alternative proposals of his own. These were practically what the Unionist leaders had proposed at the Conference, the House of Lords to be reduced and reconstituted, the power over Money Bills to be surrendered in return for certain safeguards, the Referendum to be adopted for "organic" or "constitutional" legislation. Lord Newton remarks in this debate that "its most remarkable feature was the enthusiasm shown for drastic reform by some of those who had previously deprecated any action of this nature as inopportune or ill-advised." These proposals served as the alternative Unionist policy at the election, and leaders and followers alike were specially warm in their advocacy of the Referendum as a wiser and even a more democratic solution of the parliamentary problem than the limitation of the Lords' veto. But enthusiasm for any of these specifics was short-lived, and in the long periods of Unionist and Conservative administration which have followed since this time, little or nothing has been heard of them. Liberals, seeing the deep divisions not only in their own party, but in the Unionist Party, about all the alternatives, were more than ever convinced that the Government had done wisely in concentrating on the veto and bequeathing "reform" to a future date when opinion should have ripened.

Asquith was unsparing of himself in the fortnight before the election. He spoke in all parts of the country, expounding with rare force and dignity what he believed to be the true constitutional doctrine, employing raillery and satire, when they served his purpose, but most carefully refraining from all violence of language and mob-oratory. If the controversy had to be, it could scarcely have been conducted at a higher level than under his leadership in these days. The Hull speech (25th November) with which he opened the campaign went over the whole ground, and made it clear that the policy he was proposing was not only an end but a means to an end, namely, the achievement of the causes including Home Rule and Welsh Disestablishment which would otherwise be hopelessly blocked. A passage in this speech, which remained famous for many years afterwards, dealt with the attitude of the House of Lords on the question of reform :

"Ah, gentlemen, what a change eleven short months have wrought! This ancient and picturesque structure has been condemned by its own

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1910 inmates as unsafe. The parricidal pickaxes are already at work, and  
 Age 58 constitutional jerry-builders are hurrying from every quarter with new plans. Dr. Johnson once said of a celebrated criminal, who after his condemnation showed literary activity, 'Depend upon it, Sir, when a man is going to be hanged in a fortnight it concentrates his mind wonderfully.' The activity recently displayed by the House of Lords in providing itself with a successor is surely a miracle of this kind of mental concentration. In a single sitting, not unduly prolonged, the venerable institution, which has withstood the storm and stress of ages, was transformed—in principle, of course; some of the details are still withheld—into a brand-new modern Senate. There has been nothing like it since the memorable night of 4th August, 1789. The motive for this feverish exhibition of destructive and constructive ardour is not far to seek. The Tory Party were determined at all hazards not to face another General Election with the incubus of the House of Lords on their back. There must be something to put in its place, something—it did not matter for the moment very much what—but something that could be called a Second Chamber, with a coat, however thin, of democratic varnish.

And what is this new Second Chamber which is presented to the country as the real solution of our constitutional difficulties? It is a nebulous body of uncertain size, composed in undefined proportions of hereditary Peers, of official and qualified Peers, and of Peers 'chosen,' not necessarily elected, but 'chosen'—chosen by somebody, somewhere, somehow. I said a moment ago that some of the details are lacking, and the authors of this ingenious proposal seem to think it unreasonable that at this stage they should be called on for fuller particulars. They expect the country to vote for what is to all intents and purposes a ghost. But it is on these very particulars that the merits or demerits of the scheme depend. According as they are filled in one way or another, your new Second Chamber may be better than, or as bad as, or even worse than, the existing House of Lords. In the meantime, it is no answer to our demand for an immediate and effectual removal of the obstacle that blocks the road of progress, to say that, in course of time, it may be found possible to evolve a Second Chamber, better fitted than the House of Lords, to exercise the true functions of such a body. I have always hoped and thought that it would. But I have got to deal—you have got to deal—the country has got to deal—with things here and now. We need an instrument that can be set to work at once, which will get rid of deadlocks, and give us the fair and even chance in legislation to which we are entitled, and which is all that we demand. The plan of the Government will do so, and it is the only one before the country which even pretends to meet the urgent necessities of the case." (Hull, 25th November, 1910.)

This speech presents in a lively form the argument against certain proposals which had been put forward by the Unionist representatives at the Conference, and it will be worth careful study whenever the question of House of Lords reform is again to the fore.

In the last days of the election Asquith had a sharp passage of

arms with Mr. Balfour, who charged him with having deliberately stifled the question of Home Rule until five hundred seats had been decided—a charge which he greatly resented, and which he refuted by quoting from his own speeches many days before the first polling. It is difficult to believe that after the statements of Liberal policy which had been many times repeated during the previous session—to say nothing of the January election—anyone could have voted for the Government who was not in favour of Home Rule for Ireland ; but the omission, if there was one, was more than made good by Unionist speakers, who never ceased to warn the electors that a vote for the Government would be a vote not only for the Parliament Bill, but for Home Rule, and numerous other things which they described as the destruction of the constitution and the ruin of the country. Inevitably the election was joined on all the issues that then divided parties, the Parliament Bill being characterised on the one side as the door to the promised land, and denounced on the other as the downward path to destruction.

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE PEERS AND THE PARLIAMENT BILL

The "Sufficient Majority"—The "Emergence of a Certainty"—Attitude of the Opposition—Mr. Balfour's opinion—The King and Lord Lansdowne—The question for the Peers—Reforming themselves—Lord Lansdowne's Bill—A choice of evils—The Coronation interval—Parliament Bill in the Lords—Destructive amendments—Communicating with Lord Lansdowne—Asquith's letter to the Unionist Leaders—The Die-hard Movement—An undelivered speech. J. A. S.

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THERE had been some discussions between the King and Asquith as to what should be a "sufficient" majority to bring the understanding into play, but no one could question that the majority of 126 with which the Government came back after the December election answered the definition. Though the numbers were almost the same as at the January election, the December majority was in reality a far more serviceable one, for it was concentrated on the dominant issue, and there were no other questions which divided it. On their favourite theory that Irish—or at all events Irish Nationalist votes—did not or ought not to count, and that Scottish and Welsh votes should have less weight than English, the Unionist statisticians again challenged its authority and pointed out that England, taken by itself, had returned a Unionist majority of fourteen. To which the Liberal statisticians replied that if the plural votes were subtracted there would be a handsome majority of voters not only in the inferior parts of the Kingdom, but in England itself. All that mattered to the Government was that as a referendum of the whole people, the result was beyond challenge in the new Parliament.

What struck the popular imagination in January 1911 was, as Mr. Birrell said, "the sudden emergence of a certainty." From the day in 1894 when Mr. Gladstone had said that the controversy between the two Houses "must go on to its issue," the public had watched them sparring and manœuvring with an increasing doubt whether either would ever seriously close in upon the other. Up to the 1906 Parliament the Peers on the whole had chosen their ground adroitly and retired in good order, when pressed by superior forces. Up to the same date Liberals had threatened and protested, declared

a hundred times that "a way must be found," but at the critical moment discovered either that discretion was the better part of valour or that their majority had slipped from them. But in January 1911, it was clear at last that something must happen. The Peers had invited a struggle *à outrance* when, departing at length from favourable ground, they had challenged the right of the Commons to be masters of Supply; the Commons having twice submitted their case to the country and obtained decisive verdicts were bound to act, or acknowledge themselves to be the inferior branch of the Legislature.

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In the one speech which he made during the election,<sup>1</sup> Lord Rosebery had said—and for once the words could be used without exaggeration—that the eyes of the civilised world were fixed on Great Britain. The other nations were, he thought, "astonished to see Britannia, in her old age, casting away her helmet and dancing a breakdown to the tipsy tune played to her by her Government, apparently prepared to revise at ten days' notice the Constitution of eight hundred years." Lord Rosebery had perhaps forgotten that at the very beginning of his career—as far back as 1884—he had pressed for revision, and that as Prime Minister sixteen years earlier he had declared it to be essential. Indeed, even while he was speaking he was pledged to schemes which, in the name of reform, must have made havoc of the eight hundred years old Constitution. But assuredly he was right in speaking of the issue as momentous. Whether in the hands of its Liberal opponents or its Conservative friends the old House of Lords was dissolving like a dream. The former were proposing to limit its powers, the latter to destroy its hereditary privileges and take the full plunge into pure democracy by substituting the plebiscite for its control. Small wonder that black despair descended on the die-hard as he looked helplessly for a refuge between professing friends and open enemies. Behind all the turmoil of electioneering and the din of mob oratory it was only too evident that democracy was on the march.

The King opened Parliament in person on 6th February, and the Parliament Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 22nd February, and carried through all its stages by the second week of May. The familiar arguments were repeated to the foregone conclusion and the sole object of interest was what would happen in another place. The Opposition, which governed the conduct of the Peers, had now to decide whether to resist or submit, and, if to resist, in what way, and up to what point. Its leaders, Mr. Balfour

<sup>1</sup> Edinburgh, 3rd December, 1910.

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and Lord Lansdowne, were aware of the seriousness of the position as soon as the election was over ; but not knowing what had taken place in the previous November, Mr. Balfour appears to have concluded that Ministers would approach the Crown for " guarantees " before proceeding with the Parliament Bill in the House of Commons. On that assumption he wrote a long letter to Lord Lansdowne on 27th December analysing the situation.<sup>1</sup> He thought that, distasteful as it might be to Ministers, to " play the part of bullies in the Royal Closet," they were " so completely in the hands of the Irish and of the Labour Party that they would probably be forced to ask for pledges quite inconsistent with the spirit of the Constitution." What then should the King do ? Mr. Balfour suggested that if he were to make a protest " in the most solemn manner," the " consciences of the Ministry, if that organ is not wholly atrophied, would prick them severely." He was, however, of opinion, that if this failed, it would be unfair to the King " to suggest that he will better his position by attempting, under present circumstances, to change his Government." " I consider," he said, " that such a policy would certainly be ineffectual, that it might be humiliating in its results to the Crown, and might possibly impair its popularity."

It was thus Mr. Balfour's opinion at the end of December 1910 that no alternative Government to the one in power was possible, and that the King accordingly would have no alternative but to accept the advice of the existing Government. The situation foreseen in the understanding between the King and his Ministers had therefore come to pass, and what was then hypothesis was now fact. For good reasons or bad the Unionist Party had been unable to avail themselves of the opportunity of settlement offered them in the Conference, and the question had accordingly been put to the electors who had answered it in such a way that for the time being there was no possible Government except one which was pledged to do everything in its power to convert the Parliament Bill into law.

Asquith had not supposed that the Unionist leaders would change their views about his policy, but he had undoubtedly hoped that they would bow to these facts after the second election and save him from the necessity of approaching the Crown.<sup>2</sup> They had always

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Lansdowne*, pp. 407-408.

<sup>2</sup> Speaking to his wife after the Buckingham Palace interview in the previous November, Asquith said : " If we are beaten at the General Election the question (of creating peers) will never arise, and if we get in by a working majority, the Lords will give way, so the King won't be involved." *Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, II, p. 144.

said that the House of Lords would give way when the will of the people had been sufficiently expressed, and there had now been two elections on this issue. But the Parliament Bill had kindled passions which were not to be controlled by logic and cool reason. The House of Lords was being asked to accept not an ordinary measure to which it took the ordinary partisan exception, but a blow to its own power and prestige which the great majority of its members deeply resented and expected their leaders to resist to the uttermost. These leaders were still in the dark about the chief weapon in the armoury of their opponents, and they seem to have decided that all the possibilities should be exhausted before they counselled submission.

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## II

Lord Lansdowne had an interview with the King at Windsor on 27th January, 1911, and his biographer has printed the note he made of their conversation on this occasion.

“H.M.”, he says, “told me that he had had some controversy with the Prime Minister as to the propriety of interviews between himself and the leaders of the Opposition. H.M., however, had insisted, explaining that he did not seek for advice, but desired knowledge at first hand as to the views of the Opposition. Upon that, the P.M. had reluctantly withdrawn his objection.”

Asquith had never on any ordinary occasion objected to the King's seeing the leaders of the Opposition, and, in 1909, he had actually advised King Edward that he was entirely within his rights in seeing them and discussing their action on the Budget with them. But he did undoubtedly feel on this occasion that there might be difficulties for the King as well as for the Government if he were supposed to be acting as arbiter between Government and Opposition, a task which in the circumstances of the hour would have been both invidious and dangerous. The distinction between “seeking advice” and “desiring knowledge” was in Asquith's view a very fine one, and he had thought the matter important enough for him to put his views on record in a minute as soon as the election was over :

*Asquith on the Functions of the Crown.*

10 DOWNING STREET,  
WHITEHALL, S.W.

*December 1910.*

The part to be played by the Crown, in such a situation as now exists, has happily been settled by the accumulated traditions and the unbroken practice of more than 70 years. It is to act upon the advice of the



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It follows that it is not the function of a Constitutional Sovereign to act as arbiter or mediator between rival parties and policies ; still less to take advice from the leaders on both sides, with the view to forming a conclusion of his own. George III in the early years of his reign tried to rule after this fashion, with the worst results, and with the accession of Mr. Pitt to power he practically abandoned the attempt. The growth and development of our representative system, and the clear establishment at the core and centre of our Constitution of the doctrine of Ministerial responsibility, have since placed the position of the Sovereign beyond the region of doubt or controversy.

It is technically possible for the Sovereign to dismiss Ministers who tender to him unpalatable advice. The last instance of such a proceeding was in 1834, when William IV compelled the resignation of Lord Melbourne and his colleagues. The result was, from the King's point of view, singularly unsatisfactory. The dismissed Ministers found an adequate majority in the new House of Commons. The King was compelled to take them back again, and they remained in power for another 6 years. During the long reign of Queen Victoria, though she was often in disagreement with the Ministry of the day, she never resorted to this part of the prerogative. She recognised that, so long as a Ministry possessed the confidence of the House of Commons, she had no alternative but to act on its advice. The reason is plain. The House of Commons, by reason of its power over Supply, has every Ministry at its mercy. The King cannot act without Ministers, and Ministers are impotent to carry on the government of the country without a majority in the House of Commons.

The position becomes exceptionally clear and simple, when—as the case is now—a ministry has appealed to the country upon the specific and dominating issue of the day, and upon that issue commands a majority of more than 100 in the House of Commons.

As reported by Lord Lansdowne his interview with the King kept within the limits laid down in this minute, and it was undoubtedly a valuable, if ominous, indication of the mind of the Opposition at this time. Lord Lansdowne, while agreeing that “ if the crisis were to come upon us to-morrow owing to the rejection of the Parliament Bill,” Mr. Balfour would not “ stand any chance if the country were to be again appealed to upon what would virtually be the same issue,” yet suggested that “ as the situation developed, the issue might undergo a change. For example, supposing an amendment to be carried for the purpose of safeguarding the Constitution against

a violent change during the time which, if the Bill became law, would pass before a reformed House of Lords could be called into existence, a new kind of issue of the kind which I contemplated might arise. Was it conceivable that H.M.'s advisers would desire that he should create three hundred Peers for the purpose of resisting such a proposal? " Finally Lord Lansdowne warned his Majesty to be " careful how he took for granted that in no circumstances might the House of Lords take a line which would render it impossible for him to overcome them except by the creation of Peers "; and said he thought it would be most unwise for any of those concerned, either H.M.G. or the Opposition or H.M. himself to commit themselves finally to any particular line of action or above all to allow it to become known that they had so committed themselves. It may be inferred from this that at the end of January Lord Lansdowne was doubtful of his capacity to control the House of Lords, and that he was relying on the possibility of raising a new issue which might plausibly be said to require yet another election. It was precisely this attempt to change the issue which Asquith had anticipated and which he had endeavoured to guard against when he made himself responsible for advising the dissolution of December 1910.

### III

There was much difference of opinion in the Unionist Party as to the next step. Lord Rosebery, who till then had been a pioneer of House of Lords Reform, held strongly that in the new circumstances it would be a tactical blunder to produce an alternative plan which would probably divide the Unionist Party and certainly expose them to a new attack from their opponents. But Lord Lansdowne, strongly backed by Lord Curzon, believed, on the contrary, that their position would be strengthened, if the powers that they thought necessary for a Second Chamber were claimed, not for the existing hereditary House but for a reconstituted and more popular body. This view prevailed with the Unionist Shadow Cabinet, and " the death-bed repentance " begun in the last Parliament was now resumed and definite form given to it in a Bill of which Lord Curzon was supposed to be the principal author, and which Lord Lansdowne himself introduced on 8th May. Briefly it proposed that the reconstituted House should consist of about 350 members, of whom 100 were to be Peers elected by a specially qualified panel of their own order, 120 elected by members of the

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House of Commons, 100 appointed by the Crown in proportion to the strength of parties in the House of Commons, and the remaining thirty composed of Judicial dignitaries and spiritual Lords. Incidentally the Bill invaded the Royal prerogative, since it limited the number of new Peers to be created in any one given year to five, and laid down that no hereditary Peer was to be summoned to the new Upper House, unless he were a Lord of Parliament as defined in the Bill. This meant that the constitutional remedy of a creation of Peers for a deadlock between the two Houses would be removed. It was inferred from Lord Lansdowne's speech that in the event of differences between the two Houses, the procedure was to be by way of Conferences, joint sittings, and eventually the referendum—in effect the method which the Unionist leaders had proposed at the Constitutional Conference in the previous autumn.

Lord Lansdowne frankly described his Bill as “a death-blow to the House of Lords as many of us have known it for so long,” and his biographer records that it was “received by a crowded and attentive House in a dignified, if frigid, silence.” It was said at the time that if the Peers had been asked to choose between the Parliament Bill and the Lansdowne Bill, and a vote had been taken by ballot, an actual majority would have accepted the former as the lesser evil. For the great majority of Peers the choice was between a limitation of power and a total loss both of power and status. Still worse, it became clear, as the debate proceeded, that if this plan were persisted in, they would be in considerable danger of having to accept both the whips of their own party and the scorpions of the other party. Lord Morley, speaking for the Government, gave the Bill a slightly ironical approval as a long advance on anything hitherto proposed, but said plainly that though it might or might not prove to be “a possible supplement or complement to the Parliament Bill, there was one thing it could not be, and that was a substitute or an alternative for the Parliament Bill.” The Peers now saw hanging over them the Parliament Bill plus the Lansdowne Bill, and the more conservative complained bitterly that the citadel was being betrayed from within just at the moment when it was being attacked from without. In the previous year when Lord Rosebery introduced his Resolutions on Reform, Lord Halsbury had issued an appeal to his brother Peers to “take your stand on your constitutional hereditary right and stoutly resist any tampering with it,” and more and more of them began now to look to Lord Halsbury to lead them.

Lord Morley's speech gave the *coup de grace* to Lord Lansdowne's

Bill, and no more was heard of it after the second reading which was politely accorded to it. A week later (23rd May) its place was taken by the Parliament Bill which had come up from the other House, and the lists were now set for the final encounter. The second reading was passed without a division ("grave amendments" being threatened for the Committee stage), after a debate which on both sides was on a high level of dignified oratory. Lord Rosebery intimated that he was probably speaking for the last time in that Assembly, and in a "final farewell"<sup>1</sup> raised his voice in protest against this "most ill-judged, revolutionary, and partisan measure." Only one Unionist Peer (Lord Montagu of Beaulieu) ventured the opinion that the Bill was "on the whole fair," and the least that in the circumstances in which they had been placed the Liberal leaders could have been expected to do. Most of the others considered it to be the end of all things.

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#### IV

After the second reading there was an interval for the Coronation festivities which occupied the greater part of the month of June, and the Committee stage was not begun till 28th June. But all through the month Lord Halsbury and Lord Willoughby de Broke were at work rallying the Peers to an uncompromising resistance, "strengthening Lord Lansdowne's hands," as they said, but in reality preparing for him a situation of great embarrassment. These "die-hards," as they now came to be called, were persuaded that the threat to create Peers was a bluff which could safely be disregarded, and they exhorted Lord Lansdowne to make his amendments drastic and to hold to them at all costs.

They were indeed drastic, and by 5th July the Bill had, in Asquith's words, been "as completely transformed as if no General Election had been held." In its amended form it more resembled the scheme which the Unionist leaders had presented to the Conference in the previous year than the Bill of the Government. The referendum was substituted for the suspensory veto for all measures of Home Rule whether for Ireland, Scotland, Wales, or England, and for all other measures which a Joint Committee—a kind of new third Chamber—might decide to be of "great gravity." The same Joint Committee was substituted for the Speaker for the defining of Money Bills in order, as Lord Lansdowne put it, to "prevent the House of Lords from being deprived of rights in the region of finance which they conceived to be theirs."

<sup>1</sup> Not quite final, for as Asquith himself points out (*Fifty Years of Parliament*, II, p. 96), he spoke twice in the later discussions on the Bill.

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The "contingency" referred to in the Cabinet Memorandum of 15th November, 1910, had now so evidently arisen that as soon as the Committee stage was over (14th July) the Cabinet submitted the following minute to the King :

*Cabinet Minute to the King.*

July 14, 1911.

The Amendments made in the House of Lords to the Parliament Bill are destructive of its principle and purpose, both in regard to finance and to general legislation. There is hardly one of them which, in its present form, the Government could advise the House of Commons, or the majority of the House of Commons could be persuaded, to accept. The Bill might just as well have been rejected on Second Reading. It follows that if, without any preliminary conference and arrangement, the Lords' Amendments are in due course submitted to the House of Commons they will be rejected *en bloc* by that House, and a complete deadlock between the two Houses will be created. Parliament having been twice dissolved during the last eighteen months, and the future relations between the two Houses having been at both Elections a dominant issue, a third Dissolution is wholly out of the question. Hence, in the contingency contemplated, it will be the duty of Ministers to advise the Crown to exercise its Prerogative so as to get rid of the deadlock and secure the passing of the Bill. In such circumstances Ministers cannot entertain any doubt that the Sovereign would feel it to be his Constitutional duty to accept their advice.

Three days later the King intimated that he accepted the advice of his Ministers.

So far Asquith had scrupulously observed the condition laid down in the November memorandum that no communication of the intentions of the Crown "should be made public unless and until the actual occasion should arise," and to the last he had hoped that no public communication would be necessary. But Lord Lansdowne and the Unionist leaders were now in a position in which it was all but impossible for them to yield except under visible coercion. They had not merely amended but changed out of recognition the Bill as presented to them by the Government ; and they were faced by a powerful body of their own party which had assumed—and not unreasonably—that they would never have committed themselves so deeply, if they had had any thought of yielding. Though it is evident that they themselves had contemplated the creation of Peers as a factor to be reckoned with, as soon as the election was over,<sup>1</sup> they had acted as if it could be disregarded, and had done nothing to correct the belief widely

<sup>1</sup> See *Life of Lansdowne*, Letter from Mr. Balfour to Lord Lansdowne, pp. 407-408.

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prevalent in their own party that the threat of it was an audacious bluff, which had only to be called to prove innocuous. As events were now moving, every day made it clearer that Lord Lansdowne would be unable to withdraw, unless he could say publicly that he was no longer a free agent.

Evidently, then, he had to be told the facts and the sooner the better. The first communication was made to him and Mr. Balfour in conversation by Mr. Lloyd George on 18th July, and on the following day the King's Secretary, Lord Knollys, visited Lord Lansdowne at his request.<sup>1</sup> Lord Lansdowne was apparently still relying on the change of issue—the substitution of referendum for veto—which he had told the King in his interview on 27th January might alter the situation and make it “inconceivable” that the Government should ask for a creation of Peers. At all events he objected strongly to the idea then current that the Government would reject the Lords amendments *en bloc* and return the Bill to them “in its House of Commons shape” with the threat to advise a creation of Peers in sufficient numbers to overwhelm their resistance.

The reasons which made the renewal of the argument seem desirable to Lord Lansdowne were naturally reasons which made it unacceptable to the Government. Ministers felt it to be impossible to start again on the interminable debate between the two Houses in order that their opponents might be given the chance of creating a new situation at the eleventh hour. To do that would, in their opinion, be not only to prolong the controversy unnecessarily, but greatly to increase the danger that the King would be involved in it. But they saw no objection to giving the Lords' amendments a respectful consideration in the Commons, provided it was understood that the Bill must be taken or left by the Lords on its next return to them. Asquith was always sensitive to the difficulties of opponents, and he was only too anxious in this way or any other to make the necessarily painful proceedings that were now inevitable as little embarrassing to Lord Lansdowne as possible.

But the time was short. The third reading of the Parliament Bill in the Lords was on the 20th, and Lord Lansdowne had summoned a meeting of Unionist Peers at Lansdowne House on the 21st. He said, quite reasonably, that verbal communications were not enough, and that he must have in his hands a written statement showing exactly the state of the case between the Government and the King, before he met his supporters on the 21st. On the third reading,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 417–418.

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while still intimating that the Opposition would adhere to their principal amendments, he qualified this by adding "so long as they are free agents"—words which were generally interpreted as meaning that they would give way before a threat to create Peers. This, as he had foreseen, only added to the exasperation of the "die-hards" who still professed to think that the Government were bluffing. It was now urgently necessary that he should have the means of undeceiving them, if he was to keep his party in hand, and prevent the aggravation of mischief by a swamping creation of Peers.

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For some time past the King had been willing and anxious that the facts should be disclosed. He had more and more felt the danger of being placed in a false position, if in his friendly and private intercourse with the leaders of the Opposition, he was obliged to conceal from them that he had pledged himself to give effect to the popular verdict if the need should arise. But the manner of disclosure had been left undecided until the occasion for it should actually arise, and on this there were many voices. One of Lord Lansdowne's colleagues had suggested that it should be made by the King himself, on the ground that it would be easier for the Peers to submit to the Royal authority than to yield or appear to yield to "radical dictation." The King had no fear of exposing himself, and, if it would have eased the situation, he was ready to do even that. But Asquith was firm on the point that the constitutional proprieties should be observed in the letter as well as the spirit, and that there should be nothing in the form which weakened either the theory or the fact that the King was acting on the advice of his Ministers, and that the responsibility belonged to them. The King was at Sandringham on 19th July, but after an exchange of telegrams with him, it was arranged that the Prime Minister should make the communication in a letter addressed simultaneously to Lord Lansdowne and Mr. Balfour, as leaders of the Unionist Party. He accordingly wrote the following letter :

*Asquith to Mr. Balfour and Lord Lansdowne.*

10 DOWNING STREET.

July 20, 1911.

DEAR { MR. BALFOUR,  
LORD LANSDOWNE,

I think it is courteous and right, before any public decisions are announced, to let you know how we regard the political situation.

When the Parliament Bill in the form which it has now assumed returns to the House of Commons, we shall be compelled to ask that House to disagree with the Lords' Amendments. 1911 Age 58

In the circumstances, should the necessity arise, the Government will advise the King to exercise his Prerogative to secure the passing into law of the Bill in substantially the same form in which it left the House of Commons; and His Majesty has been pleased to signify that he will consider it his duty to accept, and act on, that advice.

Yours sincerely,

H. H. ASQUITH.

The Bill in its drastically amended form was given a third reading in the House of Lords on 20th July, and Lord Lansdowne had this letter in his hands when the Unionist Peers assembled at his house on 21st July.

The story of the next few days belongs to the history of the Unionist Party, and it has been told in great detail by the biographers of Lord Lansdowne, Lord Curzon, and Lord Halsbury. Lord Lansdowne and Mr. Balfour, the authorised leaders of the party in the two Houses, were at one in believing that the evil, now seen to be a necessary one, of accepting the Parliament Bill, could only be aggravated by forcing a creation of Peers, and they had behind them most of the serious and seasoned veterans of the party. But the group which resisted this conclusion was no mere cabal against the official policy. The indomitable ex-Chancellor Lord Halsbury was its leader, the whole Salisbury clan—Lord Salisbury in the House of Lords, and his brothers in the Commons—had rallied to it; the Chamberlains, Mr. Joseph Chamberlain from his sick bed, and his son in the House of Commons, and men of high official rank like Lord Selborne, Mr. Wyndham, Sir Edward Carson, and Lord Milner had either pledged their support or were actively working for this group. The Die-hards now had all the advantages of the seemingly heroic course, and the official leaders had committed themselves so deeply and spoken so trenchantly about the iniquities of the Parliament Bill that they could be plausibly represented as showing the white feather if at the eleventh hour they preferred discretion to this kind of valour. For the time being the struggle between the two groups was as bitter and intense as between either of them and the Government; and Lord Lansdowne's difficulties were greatly increased by the existence of that large body of peers who had never been in the habit of attending debates or taking part in divisions and who were, politically speaking, unknown to the leaders and party whips. These "backwoodsmen," as they were popularly



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called, dwelt in an unexplored region which was peculiarly at the mercy of vigorous pioneers like Lord Willoughby de Broke, who was now indefatigably at work as Lord Halsbury's chief lieutenant. To get at them and keep them steady for whatever line the official leaders might recommend at the critical moment meant a laborious effort in correspondence addressed to each separately ; and when all had been done, it was still in doubt how large numbers of them would vote, or whether a disclosure of the actual situation would influence them to defiance or discretion.

## VI

The House of Commons met on 24th July to consider the amended Parliament Bill, but rose without hearing a word on that subject. For half an hour the Prime Minister stood at the box, unable to make himself heard, his voice being drowned in an organised clamour of which Lord Hugh Cecil and Mr. F. E. Smith were the ringleaders. "He was derided, scorned, insulted," said the parliamentary sketch-writer of the *Standard* the next day. "It was all meant and all done." Another Unionist newspaper explained that this demonstration had the double object of venting anger against Asquith and stiffening the Unionist leaders, who were contemplating surrender. Whatever might have been the intention, the only result was to incense the Liberal Party and to bring Asquith a handsome letter<sup>1</sup> of regret and apology from opponents who felt their cause to have been degraded by this rowdyism. The biographer of Lord Halsbury tells us that the silencing of Asquith had the practical inconvenience of keeping the Opposition in the dark as to the "advice" given by the Government to the Sovereign until it was revealed in the debate on the vote of censure moved by the Conservative leaders in the House of Commons on 7th August. This is a hint of the length to which the theory of his bluffing was carried in die-hard circles, for not only had the information been conveyed to the Peers at the Lansdowne House meeting, but the speech which Asquith would have delivered, if it had not been for this interruption, was printed in the newspapers the next day, and was perfectly explicit on this point. That speech contains a passage which is likely to remain the *locus classicus* on the subject of the Royal prerogative, and is printed in an appendix to this chapter.

<sup>1</sup> Among the signatories of this letter were Col. Lockwood, Sir A. C. Gripps, and Lord Henry Cavendish Bentinck.

## APPENDIX

Speech intended for delivery in the House of Commons on 24th July, 1911, but owing to interruptions not delivered :

" In offering the advice which the Government think it right at this juncture to tender to the House, I must at once recall the facts, familiar as they are, which from a Parliamentary point of view place this Bill in an almost unique category.

The principle upon which it is founded and the main lines upon which it is drawn were affirmed and approved in the House of Commons as far back as the year 1907. At the General Election in the year 1910, which followed rejection by the House of Lords of the Budget, this principle took its place in the forefront of party controversy, was debated upon every platform, and became the predominant issue of the election. In the new House of Commons, resolutions embodying all or almost all its detailed provisions were carried by large majorities, the Bill itself was introduced, and no one doubts that, but for the death of the King and the temporary truce which ensued, it would have been passed in that Session through all its stages and sent to another place. The Conference which followed proved that with the best will and the most strenuous efforts a settlement by agreement was impossible. The Bill was then presented to the House of Lords, and was laid aside in favour of an alternative scheme put forward by Lord Lansdowne on behalf of the responsible leaders of the Opposition, and of which the novel and at the same time the governing (so far as conflicts between the two Houses are concerned) principle was the introduction and application of the Referendum. Another General Election followed in December 1910. The people now had before them on the one hand this Bill itself in all its details, both principle and machinery ; and on the other, the counter proposals of the Opposition which, especially in regard to the Referendum, were vigorously defended on the one side and as vigorously attacked on the other, in every constituency in the country. What was the result ? A majority for the Government of 60 in Great Britain, of 120 in the United Kingdom as a whole.

In a word it is true to say of this Bill, in a sense in which it would not be true of any Bill in our Parliamentary history, that it was the main issue of two elections, and that by no form of Referendum that could be devised could the opinion of the electorate upon it have been more carefully ascertained or more clearly pronounced.

The Bill was approved, as I have said, both as to its principle and as to its machinery. That is important because, as I shall show you in a moment, the main purpose and effect of the amendments made in the House of Lords is, in regard to matters of the greatest importance, to

set that machinery aside, and to replace it by a new and, as I think, a worse edition of the very expedient which the electors, when consulted, deliberately rejected. It is a mistake, indeed it is a misrepresentation, to allege that the Government have shown themselves indisposed to accept changes consistent with the main principle and purpose of the Bill. On the contrary in Committee here, in Clause 1, we consented to amendments confining the Clause to public Bills, excluding all matters that dealt only with local taxation and amplifying and rendering more precise the enumeration of the classes of Bills which alone were to be entitled to the privileged position conferred by the Clause. In the same spirit, in Clause 2 we accepted amendments to protect its machinery against possible, though, as we thought, most improbable, risks of abuse. If the amendments made by the House of Lords were of the same or a similar class; if they were, as I see they are strangely described by a most reverend prelate, who on this occasion seems to have lost touch with the realities of the situation, 'safe-guarding' amendments; if they were not in fact—whatever may have been their intention—the substitution for the Bill in its main features of the alternative repudiated less than a year ago by the electorate, we should have been prepared to ask the House even now to give them respectful consideration.

Let me make good in a few words the description I have just given of the general effect of the Lords' amendments. Their most novel feature is undoubtedly the creation of a new tribunal which is to be in effect, predominant over the House of Commons in matters of finance, and over both Houses in all legislative matters which the tribunal holds to be at once of great gravity and insufficiently considered by the electorate. And how is this Junta to be composed? It is, in its latest form—an improvement, I admit, due to Lord St. Aldwyn, on the original proposal—to consist of the Lord Chancellor, the Speaker, the Lord Chamberlain, Chairman of Ways and Means, a Lord of Appeal chosen from persons who have held high judicial office, and a member of this household appointed by the Speaker.

Just consider the functions which, for the first time, it is proposed—for I do not suggest that anyone had the courage to submit this part of the scheme to the electorate—to entrust such a body. Take, first, finance. It is not a question merely of associating with the Speaker some two or three men of experience for the purpose of considering whether the Bill does or does not fall within any of the categories set out in the Clause 1. That is a very different matter. I believe that in the course of our debates, when we were settling the specific enumeration of Bills which alone were to be deemed Money Bills—so as to avoid the possible abuse of tacking—I described as their general qualification that their governing and not merely their incidental purpose should be financial. But as the House will remember I was most careful throughout to make it clear that the only safe way of dealing with such a matter was to eschew general language, and to describe specifically, and with precision, what Bills were, and what were not, to be deemed of a financial character. The House of Lords, seizing upon my phrase, and using it for the very purpose which I deprecated, propose that this Joint Committee can, at their discretion, remove from the uncontrolled jurisdiction of the House

of Commons any Bill if, in their opinion, the governing purpose of the Bill, or any portion of it, is such as to bring it within the category of general legislation.

I do not hesitate to say that there is not a single one of the great Budgets of the last 70 years which might not conceivably and even plausibly be brought within the ambit of these words. If we were to assent to any such proposal—and it is not a question of language but of substance—we should be deliberately putting the House of Commons, by Act of Parliament, in a lower and weaker position as regards finance than it has occupied for 200 years. A strange result, indeed, of the emphatic condemnation of the electors of the rejection of the Budget of 1909.

But even more serious, and with all respect, I must say more grotesque, are the functions assigned to the Junta under the celebrated Lansdowne amendment to Clause 2. That amendment begins by excluding absolutely from the operation of the Clause Bills affecting the existence of the Crown or the Protestant Succession ; no one is likely to use the Parliament Bill for such a purpose. It goes on to another specific exclusion—that of measures establishing national Parliaments, Assemblies or Councils, with legislative powers in any part of the United Kingdom. Why, one may ask, is this of all forms of constitutional or organic change the one selected for express mention ? What, for example, of the Established Church or of franchise and redistribution or of a change in the number and constitution of the Second Chamber itself ? I believe that some noble lords, whose hatred and fear of Home Rule does not wholly blind them to other possible developments in the field of political emancipation, ventured to put these questions or some of them. They were referred for reassurance to sub-section C., which empowers the Joint Committee on reference to exclude from the normal working of Clause 2 any measure of any kind provided in their opinion it raises an issue of great gravity (whatever that means) and the judgment of the country has not been sufficiently (whatever that means) ascertained. And what is to happen then ? Why the measure in question is to be submitted for approval to the electors in manner to be hereafter provided by Act of Parliament.

This, Sir, is the proposal which is deliberately put forward by the Opposition late in the eleventh hour of this constitutional controversy, and, as the Archbishop solemnly assures us, for the purpose of safeguarding our Bill against possible abuse. Just see what in practice it would mean. A Bill is brought in for, say, Welsh Disestablishment. It is passed by the House of Commons in three successive Sessions, at least two years having elapsed between the date of its second reading in the first, and its passing in the third of those sessions. Under those conditions it would, notwithstanding rejection by the House of Lords by virtue of Clause 2, pass automatically on to the Statute book. But under the Lansdowne amendment all that the House of Lords has to do is to carry a resolution requiring a reference to the Joint Committee which must thereupon be assembled. And then these six gentlemen are solemnly to meet together and determine—and remember their determination, the determination of this wholly irresponsible body, is final and conclusive in all Courts of Law—they are to go through the farce of appearing to

determine whether a Bill, passed in three successive Sessions through the House of Commons against the House of Lords, in their opinion raises an issue of great gravity, and whether some three years before, the judgment of the country had or had not been 'sufficiently ascertained.' And what then? The measure (say a measure for Welsh Disestablishment) is to go separately to a Referendum to the electors of the United Kingdom in manner to be hereafter provided by Act of Parliament. But what sort of an Act of Parliament? In the meantime the whole of this Bill is to be hung up. Nowhere and at no time has such a proposal been put forward in the whole domain of constitutional experiment. Is this what the electors voted for last December?

No, Sir, these amendments, taken as a whole, amount to a rejection of our Bill. What would happen if they were to be incorporated in the measure? When you have a Unionist majority in both Houses, the whole thing becomes a dead letter. Matters remain exactly as they are. Measures of the utmost gravity and most far-reaching effect may be passed in defiance of public opinion over the heads of the electorate. You live in fact under unchecked and undiluted Single-Chamber Government. But with a Liberal Government in power you would have a House of Commons fettered beyond all its predecessors in the control of finance, and in all cases where an irresponsible and non-representative body independent of both Houses should so determine, every deadlock will be settled and settled only by a Referendum *ad hoc*. In other words, the Bill in its present form is a direct contradiction and a flat negation of the decision of the country.

What, then, ought to be done? and in particular what ought to be the attitude of this House in the situation so created? We tried—the leaders on both sides—tried—to settle this controversy last year by conference and agreement. That attempt, unhappily, came to nothing. Lord Lansdowne tells us that there are some, at all events, of the amendments which the Lords have introduced into the Bill which in their view are so essential that they would certainly not be prepared to recede from them in substance so long as they remained free agents. I assume, of course, that this language refers to amendments like his own, and I have to say in reply on behalf of the Government, and I believe on the majority of the House of Commons, that to such amendments we cannot and shall not see our way to accede.

We have, therefore, come to the conclusion, and thought it courteous and right to communicate that conclusion in advance to leaders of the Opposition, that unless the House of Commons is prepared to concede these essential points there is only one constitutional way of escape from what would otherwise be an absolute deadlock. It is the method of resort to the Prerogative which is recognised by the most authoritative exponents of constitutional law and practice, by writers such as Erskine May, Bagehot, and Dicey, when, as here is the case, the House of Commons must be presumed to represent on the matter in dispute the deliberate action of the nation. But it is not necessary to rely on the *dicta* of text writers, however eminent. For the precedent of 1832 is what the lawyers call a case precisely in point. As we are accused by ignorant people of being responsible for a *coup d'état* or at any rate of an unprecedented

breach in the practice of the Constitution, I think it is worth while to go in some little detail into the history of that transaction.

Duke of Wellington defeated. Lord Grey took office late in 1830.

No Reform Bill before country at previous elections.

1831. March 1. Bill introduced.

March 22. Second reading carried by majority of one.

April 18. On General Gascoyne's amendment, Government defeated in this House by majority of eight.

They at once advise King to dissolve.

1831. May. General Election.

July 6. Second reading Commons ; majority 136. Went up to Lords.

October 8. Second reading rejected (House of Lords) 41.

No second dissolution but Parliament prorogued and Bill re-introduced in Commons.

Passed through all stages there, and went up to Lords a second time.

1832. May 6. Second reading in Lords ; majority 9.

May 7. Lyndhurst's amendment (on going into Committee). It was at this stage that Ministers asked the Sovereign to authorise them, if necessary, to use the Royal prerogative of creation. William IV refused and Lord Grey resigned.

After ten days—abortive attempt of Lyndhurst and Wellington to form Government (Peel standing aloof).

On May 17—Grey recalled, King given written consent 'to create such number of peers as will be sufficient to ensure passing of Reform Bill.'

Lord Grey announced in House of Lords that he had now confident security of passing Reform Bill unimpaired in its principles and in all its essential details.

The Bill was carried without its being necessary to resort to prerogative. But everyone knows that it would not have been carried unless Lord Grey had requested and the King had consented to the exercise to any extent that might be necessary of the power of creation. Lord Grey was attacked, as I am now, for advising an unconstitutional course.

This is what he said in reply :

(May 17. 1832) : ' We were under the necessity of offering the advice to create as many new peers as would carry the measure of reform through this House unmutilated in any of its essential provisions, or resign our offices. Now I say that, under these circumstances, the advice to create new peers was required. The noble and learned Lord says that it was not constitutional ; but I say that it was constitutional, and I can refer him to books of authority on the subject in which it is distinctly asserted that one of the uses of vesting the prerogative of creating new peers in the Crown is to prevent the possibility of the recurrence of these evils which must otherwise result from a permanent collision between the two Houses of Parliament ; and this danger was rendered imminent by the opposition made to the Reform Bill by the noble Lords on the other side of the House. And, I ask, what would be the consequences if we were to suppose that such a prerogative did not exist, or could not be

constitutionally exercised ? The Commons have a control over the power of the Crown by the privilege, in extreme cases, of refusing the Supplies, and the Crown has, by means of its power to dissolve the House of Commons, a control upon any violent and rash proceedings on the part of the Commons ; but if a majority of this House (House of Lords) is to have the power whenever they please of opposing the declared and decided wishes both of the Crown and the people, without any means of modifying that power, then this country is placed entirely under the influence of an uncontrollable oligarchy. I say that if a majority of this House should have the power of acting adversely to the Crown and Commons, and was determined to exercise that power without being liable to check or control, the Constitution is completely altered, and the Government of this country is not a limited monarchy ; it is no longer, my Lords, the Crown, the Lords, the Commons, but a House of Lords—a separate oligarchy—governing absolutely the others. On these grounds we tendered that advice to His Majesty which we were well justified by the spirit and by the letter of the Constitution in tendering, nay, more, which, under the circumstances, it was our imperative duty to tender, considering the consequences that were likely to result from the failure of the measure.’

We cannot doubt then, Sir, that the advice we have rendered to the Crown—and which the Crown has accepted—is warranted by the constitutional principles, and that we are following in spirit and almost to the letter the precedent set by the great Whig statesman of 1832. I need hardly add that we do not desire to see the prerogative exercised, and that we trust that the necessity for its exercise may be avoided. There is nothing derogatory or humiliating to a great party in admitting defeat. No one asks them to accept the defeat as final. They have only to convince their fellow-countrymen that they are right and we are wrong, and they can repeal our Bill. Believing, as we do, that the chances of a satisfactory issue may thereby be improved, I do not propose to-day to ask the House to take any action in regard to the Lords’ amendments, but in due course to adjourn this debate.”

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE VICTORY OF THE COMMONS

The two votes of censure—Asquith and the King—Lord Crewe's account of the Buckingham Palace interview—Unwisdom of further explanations—The Commons and the Lords' amendments—The Bill returned to the Lords—The final scene—The Archbishop's intervention—Majority 17—The King's relief—The potential Peers. J. A. S.

THE next move of the Opposition was to set down votes of censure 1911  
in the Commons on 7th August, and in the Lords on 8th August. Age 58  
The tactical, and quite legitimate, object of this was to enable the Unionist leaders, who had now decided to yield, to put their protest on record in speeches which might have had the opposite result of what they intended, if delivered when the Bill was finally returned to the Lords. The resolution proposed in the House of Commons was in the following terms :

“That the advice given to His Majesty by His Majesty's Ministers whereby they obtained from His Majesty a pledge that a sufficient number of peers would be created to pass the Parliament Bill in the shape in which it left this House is a gross violation of Constitutional liberty, whereby among many other evil consequences, the people will be precluded from again pronouncing upon the policy of Home Rule.”

This was delicate ground for all parties, and it was hardly possible that a debate on such a proposition could avoid speculations and implied criticisms upon the King's conduct. Mr. Balfour developed the idea that advantage had been taken of “a sovereign who had only just come to the throne, and who, from the very nature of the case, had not and could not have behind him that long personal experience of public affairs which some of his great predecessors had.” However adroit a speaker might be, argument could hardly go forward on this hypothesis without reflections on the King's judgment of the situation and the correctness of his conduct as a Constitutional Sovereign. And on the other side a clumsy speaker in defending either the King or the Government might easily say too much and appear to claim the King as a partisan of the Government and its policy. The introduction of Home Rule into the resolution made



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the ground even more treacherous, for the suggestion plainly was that the King by accepting the advice of his Ministers had made himself a party to their Irish policy, and, without an express disclaimer from Ministers, this might come to be believed. Mr. Balfour was, in fact, merely presenting in parliamentary form the theory which Lord Lansdowne had advanced in his interview with the King at the end of January that a new situation, requiring another dissolution, would be created if the Lords proposed a referendum for this and other grave questions. But any spread of the issue beyond the Parliament Bill carried with it the implication that the King had either willingly or "under duress" opened the door to Radical legislation, and that he had acted wrongly in so doing.

Asquith showed his usual skill in avoiding these pitfalls and keeping to the middle course in his statements of the constitutional doctrine, and his protest against the charge of having coerced the King made a profound impression :

"I am accustomed, as Lord Grey in his day was accustomed, to be accused of breach of the Constitution and even of treachery to the Crown. I confess, as I have said before, that I am not in the least sensitive to this cheap and ill-informed vituperation. It has been my privilege, almost now I think unique, to serve in close and confidential relations three successive British Sovereigns. My conscience tells me that in that capacity, many and great as have been my failures and shortcomings, I have consistently striven to uphold the dignity and just privileges of the Crown. But I hold my office, not only by favour of the Crown, but by the confidence of the people, and I should be guilty indeed of treason if in this supreme moment of a great struggle I were to betray their trust." (House of Commons, 7th Aug., 1911.)

Nevertheless this debate with its accompaniment of rumour and gossip had created an uneasy feeling that the King's action was misunderstood, and Asquith was urged to ask his colleagues in the House of Lords to make a fuller statement when that House proceeded with its own vote of censure the following day. Accordingly when the House of Lords debate came on the next day Lord Crewe gave an account of the interview which he and Asquith had jointly with the King on 16th November, 1910 :

"I have His Majesty's leave to state exactly what occurred, because, since this question of that interview had been made the subject of so much comment, the King naturally desires that the facts should be plainly stated. The effect of that interview was that we ascertained His Majesty's view that, if the opinion of the country were clearly ascertained upon the Parliament Bill, in the last resort a creation of peers might be the only remedy and might be the only way of concluding the dispute. His

Majesty faced the contingency and entertained the suggestion as a possible one with natural, and if I may be permitted to use the phrase, in my opinion with legitimate reluctance. His Majesty, however, naturally entertained the feeling—a feeling which we entirely shared—that if we resigned our offices, having as we had a large majority in the House of Commons, the only result could be an immediate dissolution in which it would practically be impossible, however anxious we should be, to keep the Crown out of the controversy. The mixing up of the Crown in a controversy such as that was naturally most distasteful to its illustrious wearer, whom we may regard as the first guardian of its prestige, but it could be scarcely more distasteful to His Majesty than to myself and my colleagues, for reasons which I need not, I am sure, dilate upon. But it is altogether inaccurate—and I might use a stronger phrase—to say that at that time we asked His Majesty for guarantees. The Question whether at any time the advice to create peers should be given must necessarily depend for one thing upon the adequacy of the majority with which we were returned to the House of Commons, assuming that we were returned at all.”

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Even this did not give entire satisfaction to the King, and he pressed for further explanations which would have laid stress on his reluctance to grant the November understanding.<sup>1</sup>

But Asquith felt this ground to be dangerous. His own words describing the November Conference had been: “The King was pleased to inform me that he felt that he had no alternative but to accept the advice of the Cabinet”; and this, it seemed to him, accurately described both the facts and the constitutional position created by the impossibility of finding a Ministry, present or prospective, which could have advised him differently with the support of a majority in the House of Commons or the country. To be led into public discussions about the feelings and motives of the King or his views about the policy of the Government would, in Asquith’s opinion, be even less in the interests of the King than of the Government, and he resisted any further explanations. Nothing would ever have induced him to use any language which could have been construed as an admission that he had coerced the King.

## II

The Commons dealt with the Lords’ amendments on 8th August, and instead of dismissing them *en bloc*, as had at first been suggested, took them in detail, accepted one, excluding from the operation of the Bill any measure extending the duration of the Parliament beyond five years, and made a concession on another by providing that the Speaker should consult the Chairman of Ways and Means

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Lord Knollys to Mr. Vaughan Nash, 9th August, 1911.

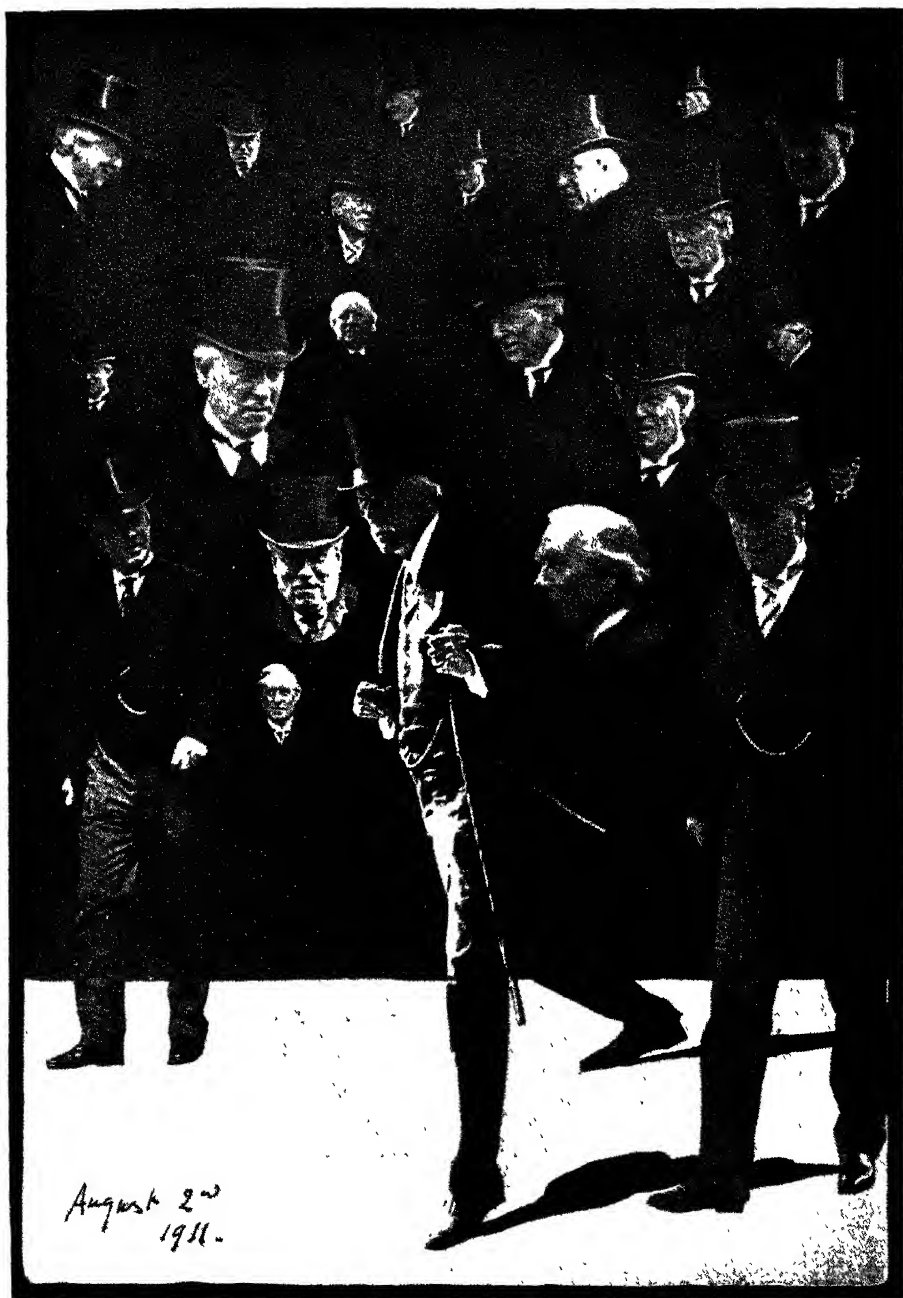
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and the Chairman of Committee of Public Accounts when called upon to define Money Bills. Asquith was prevented from attending this debate by one of his rare attacks of illness, but he was in touch all day with the King's Secretary in preparation for the crucial and final stage which followed the next day (9th August), when the Bill was again returned from the Commons to the Lords, and the division had to be taken on the motion that Lord Lansdowne's amendments be not insisted on.

The situation on the eve of this debate was that Lord Lansdowne had collected and published a list of 320 Unionist peers who were prepared to abstain from voting, and that Lord Morley, as leader of the Government peers, had a list of eighty who were prepared to vote for the Bill. The Die-hards who were determined to vote against the Bill at all costs had not disclosed their numbers, but they were supposed to be in sufficient force to defeat the Government if the issue remained between them and the Ministerial peers. But there remained a considerable number of "backwoodsmen" whose intention was in doubt and whose whereabouts was unknown, and a limited number of Unionist peers who were prepared at the last resort to vote with the Government to prevent the creation of peers. The Archbishops and Bishops had kept their own counsel, but it was supposed that a good many of them would also in the last resort vote with the Government.

It was literally true that when the debate opened, no one knew or could know the result. What was more, it became evident after the first few speeches that large numbers of peers were still in doubt as to the true state of the facts. In spite of Asquith's letter to the Unionist leaders, in spite of their communications to their followers, in spite of Asquith's definite statement in the House of Commons and Lord Crewe's expansion of it in the House of Lords, they still believed or professed to believe that the Government was bluffing. Lord Halsbury still spoke of "this bogey of the creation of peers," and Lord Willoughby de Broke declared that "until these peers are created, the statement that they will be created is nothing more or less than a menace." Lord St. Aldwyn, who came to Lord Lansdowne's support, argued earnestly with this frame of mind, and warned the House that it was in peril not only of a creation, but of a swamping creation, of peers; but when the debate stood adjourned on 9th August it was still a widely spread belief that it would be safe to "call the Government bluff."

Lord Crewe, the official leader, was still prevented by illness from regular attendance in the House of Lords, and in his absence the



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conduct of the critical debate fell to Lord Morley who, in his *Recol-lections*,<sup>1</sup> has left a careful record of the action he took :

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“Late in the evening” (9th August), he writes, “an intimation was conveyed to me of uneasiness lest the announcement of the King’s acceptance of the advice to create peers had not been made with such distinct emphasis as to shake the obstinate and fixed disbelief of some and the random miscalculation of ulterior consequences in others. The Prime Minister’s statement in the Commons was unmistakable, but when the politician’s mind is feverish, be he peer or commoner, he catches at a straw. The words ‘natural reluctance’ (used by Lord Crewe) were stretched in all manner of unnatural interpretations. To dispel these illusions so pregnant with disaster was rightly judged imperative, if the Bill was to have a chance. The occasion for setting misunderstandings straight was evidently to be found in my coming reply to the questions that had been put on the first day’s debate. Next morning, accordingly, I found words, despatched the formula for submission to the King and received it back with his ‘entire approval.’ The words were : ‘If the Bill should be defeated to-night His Majesty will assent to the creation of peers sufficient in number to guard against any possible combination of the different parties in opposition by which the Parliament Bill might be exposed a second time to defeat.’”

Lord Morley himself has described the scene, when, that afternoon (10th Aug.) in the House of Lords, in answer to an appeal from Lord Rosebery, he drew from his pocket and read out the short paper defining the terms of the Royal assent. “The silence was intense : for a moment or two there was a hum of curiosity and dispute whether it had been this word or that. Then a member of the front bench opposite, rising at the table, eagerly begged me to repeat it. No encore was ever more readily granted, amid loud approval from the benches behind me and perplexed silence in front.” To clinch it he added : “Every vote given against my motion will be a vote for a large and prompt creation of peers.”

Lord Halsbury’s biographer tells us that even this declaration “had little effect upon the Die-hard leaders. They remained unconvinced.” It seems more probable that they were too deeply committed to be able to draw back at the last minute of the eleventh hour. But so plain an intimation of what lay ahead could not be without effect upon others who had genuine doubts, and the general opinion at the time was that it saved the Bill. There was a perilous moment when the Duke of Norfolk announced that, if any Unionist, instead of abstaining, should vote with the Government, he on his side would not abstain but vote with Lord Halsbury, but at the last moment a great access of strength came to the Government from the

<sup>1</sup> Vol. II, p. 351.

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Archbishop of Canterbury, who said that he had been moved from his resolve to abstain by "the callousness—I had almost said levity—with which some noble Lords seem to contemplate the creation of some five hundred new peers, a course of action which would make this House, and indeed, our country, the laughing-stock of the British Dominions beyond the seas and of those foreign countries whose constitutional life and progress have been largely modelled on our own." When the division was called the result, says Lord Morley, "was still to all of us profoundly dark, and dark it remained in the dead silence only broken by the counting of the tellers, down to the very moment of fate." The Bill was saved by a majority of seventeen, 131 to 114. Thirty-seven Unionists and thirteen Bishops voted with the Government. So ended this most dangerous occasion.

### III

"It was a relief greater than one can describe," wrote the King's Secretary the next morning, "when the result of the division was known last night, and to nobody more than the King, who for the past eight months has suffered far more than most of us can realise. He has gone off happy—and please God we shall have no more such crises." For the King the previous weeks had been a time of unceasing anxiety culminating in the censure debates with their oblique criticism of his action, and the last stage with its exhausting suspense and the nightmare of a creation of peers looming just ahead. Whatever precautions might be taken, it had been impossible to shield him completely from the war of tongue and pen which had raged so violently in these weeks. Men and women of the wealthy and aristocratic classes, who were uninstructed in the law and custom of the Constitution, had come to think of the Monarchy as their natural ally in a conflict with the popular forces, and spoke as if they had been betrayed in their hour of need. Others dwelt upon the King's inexperience, and advanced the unflattering theory that he had let himself be imposed upon by an elderly and crafty Minister. These were only the ebullitions of the hour. Within a very short time the vast majority of the public realised that in an extremely difficult position the King had followed the strict road of constitutional propriety, and in so doing rendered the best service in his power to both the country and the Monarchy.

Asquith, meanwhile, had gone to stay with friends at Wallingford, whence he sent a note to his secretary on the morning of the 10th :

"If the vote goes wrong in the H. of L. the Cabinet should be summoned for 11.30 Downing Street to-morrow morning and the King asked to

postpone his journey till the afternoon. . . . If I have satisfactory news 1911  
this evening I shall come up for Cabinet 12.30. My voice is on the mend Age 56  
but still croaky."

He, too, in spite of his robust health and even temperament, had felt the strain of these days, and it had been aggravated, far more than the public knew, by the long-drawn out and very anxious crisis in foreign affairs which accompanied the domestic struggle. He had of course been heavily bombarded in the Lords' debates, and in his final speech Lord Halsbury had—with an aptness of which he was unaware—dwelt grimly on the fact that the Lord Oxford who had advised Queen Anne to create twelve new peers to overcome the opposition of the House of Lords to the Treaty of Utrecht had afterwards been impeached and committed to the Tower, where he was thankful to escape with the relatively mild penalty of two years' close confinement. But no sooner was the issue decided than the stream of wrath was diverted from the head of the Prime Minister on to the heads of the even guiltier Unionist peers and Bishops who had saved the Bill by voting with the Government. The language used about these by certain Unionist newspapers would be worthy of a place in any anthology of invective. The *Globe* expressed the hope that "no honest man will take any of them by the hand again, that their friends will disown them, their clubs expel them, and that alike in politics and social life they will be made to feel the bitter shame they have brought upon us all." The *Observer* said that "there could be no closing of the ranks while there are traitors in the ranks, unexpelled and unrebuked," and declared the party to have been "disgraced by the ignoble train of Unionists, lay and clerical who voted with the Government." Asquith himself has quoted with great appreciation a passage in which Lord Robert Cecil threatened the Bishops with expulsion when the time came to reform the House of Lords. But these are now curiosities of controversy which are only worth reviving in so far as they illustrate the temper of these times.

What exactly would have happened if the Bill had been rejected? Constitutional and historical students have been heard to regret that the experiment was not actually made, and, though the question is academic, it is from that point of view worth a little consideration. There is no doubt about the Government's intention. They meant, in Lord Morley's words, to advise "a large and prompt creation of peers"—"sufficient in number to guard against any possible combination of the different parties in opposition by which the Parliament Bill might be exposed a second time to



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defeat." It was said afterwards that the word "large" and the reference to "any possible combination" were what influenced a considerable number of the waverers. If so, these waverers judged rightly, for the notion that the Government was bluffing was an illusion and a dangerous one. That the King would have been reluctant to create a larger number than would be necessary to effect the object in view may be taken for granted, but considering the temper of the House of Lords as revealed in these debates and the possibility of further action by its Die-hards and their uncalled reserves, a Government which wished to make sure of the result could not have advised a small creation. There has survived among Asquith's papers a list of those whom he had intended to approach, if the necessity had arisen, to permit their names to be submitted to the King. This is printed in an Appendix to this chapter. It has now merely a curious interest, but it may help the reader to judge how far it was in Asquith's mind to lower the status and personnel of the House of Lords, as was often alleged in the heat of this controversy. It should of course be borne in mind that none of those who are on this list were approached or even knew that they were likely to be approached, and how many of them would have been willing to take up the task proposed for them must remain a speculation.

## APPENDIX

The following is the list of those whom or some of whom it was proposed to approach with a view to the submission of their names to the King in the event of a creation of Peers becoming necessary. It is printed without alteration exactly as found among Asquith's papers.

The Rt. Hon. Sir John T. Brunner, Bart.	The Earl of Clonmel.
The Rt. Hon. James Stuart.	Sir Thomas Courtenay T. Warner. Bart., C.B., M.P.
The Rt. Hon. Robert Farquharson, M.D., LL.D.	Sir Edward Strachey, Bart., M.P.
The Rt. Hon. Sir Algernon West, G.C.B.	Charles Norris Nicholson, Esq., M.P.
The Rt. Hon. Frederick Huth Jackson.	Sir Thomas Borthwick, Bart.
The Rt. Hon. Arnold Morley.	Sir Francis Layland-Barratt, Bart.
The Rt. Hon. Sir John Rhys.	David Erskine, Esq.
The Rt. Hon. Sir Edgar Speyer, Bart.	Sir William H. Lever, Bart.
The Rt. Hon. Sir George O. } Trevelyan, Bart.	Sir A. Thomas.
The Rt. Hon. Arthur H. Dyke } Aeland.	J. Crombie, Esq.
The Rt. Hon. Eugene Wason, M.P.	Sir Frederick Pollock, Bart.
The Rt. Hon. John W. Mellor, K.C.	Sir James Low, Bart.
The Rt. Hon. Sir William Mather.	Sir George H. Lewis, Bart.
The Rt. Hon. Sir Henry E. Roscoe, F.R.S., Ph.D., LL.D.	Sir Edward Donner, Bart.
The Rt. Hon. George W. E. Russell.	The Hon. Arthur L. Stanley.
The Rt. Hon. Thomas W. Russell.	Major Gen. J. F. Brocklehurst, C.B., C.V.O.
The Rt. Hon. John F. Cheetham.	Col. Arthur Collins.
The Rt. Hon. Robert G. Glendinning.	Col. Sir Arthur Davidson, K.C.B., K.C.V.O.
The Rt. Hon. James Caldwell.	The Hon. O. S. B. Brett.
The Rt. Hon. Arthur Cohen, K.C.	Sir Francis D. Blake, Bart.
The Rt. Hon. Alfred Emmott, M.P.	Sir John Barker, Bart.
The Rt. Hon. Sir T. Vezey Strong (Lord Mayor).	R. Farrer, Esq.
H. J. Tennant, Esq., M.P.	The Hon. W. Pember Reeves.
Sir J. Herbert Roberts, Bart., M.P.	Sir H. Harmsworth, Bart.
Sir Archibald Williamson, Bart., M.P.	Seymour Allen, Esq.
Sir John A. Dewar, Bart., M.P.	— Caird, Esq. (Dundee.)
John S. Ainsworth, Esq., M.P.	A. Chamberlain, Esq.
William Phipson Beale, Esq., K.C., M.P.	Sir K. Muir Mackenzie, G.C.B., K.C.
	George Fuller, Esq.
	H. Holloway, Esq.
	Captain A. F. Luttrell.
	Sir Walter Runciman, Bart.
	Sir E. Russell.
	Sir H. Primrose, K.C.B., C.S.I., I.S.O.

- Sir A. R. Simpson.  
 Professor Henry Jones, LL.D.  
 Anthony Hope Hawkins, Esq.  
 Henry Neville Gladstone, Esq.  
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 Percy Barlow, Esq.  
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## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

Recapitulation—Origin and nature of the struggle between Lords and Commons—The rejection of the Budget and its consequences—The plight of a Liberal Government—Asquith's caution and cool judgment—The death of King Edward and the fresh start—Exhausting the possibilities—King George and the December Election—An alleged infamy—The necessity of an understanding with the King—Secrecy and the objections to it—A hope that failed. J. A. S.

1911  
Age 58    A COOL judgment of the events recorded in the previous chapters was scarcely to be expected at the time when they occurred, but as we look back on them, they are seen in a logical sequence coming to its climax on 10th August, 1911.

In the years 1906 and 1907 the Unionist Party, by its control of the House of Lords,<sup>1</sup> had succeeded in destroying the chief part of the legislation proposed by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's Government, in spite of the immense majority with which it had been returned to power; and in the year 1908, when Asquith became Prime Minister, it was threatening all other important measures on the Liberal programme with the same fate. By this time it was evident that, unless the opposition of the House of Lords could be broken down, the continuance of a Liberal Government in office, or its return to power by any majority that the country might give it, would be useless for any serious purpose to which the Liberal Party attached importance. In the circumstances Asquith could neither have retained office for more than a brief period, nor have appealed to the country with any prospect of success, except as the Minister who was pledged and determined to overcome the resistance of the House of Lords.

Until the year 1909 the struggle had proceeded on the legislative ground on which a Liberal Government might accept rebuffs and yet continue to exist with whatever loss of credit or prestige. But the rejection of the Budget made it an immediate life and death issue for the Government and the Liberal Party, and indeed for

<sup>1</sup> In a phrase long remembered, Mr. Balfour said soon after the election that, "whether in power or in opposition the Unionist Party would continue to control the destinies of this Empire."

the House of Commons, if it attached importance to its ancient right of controlling Supply. Technical and legal arguments were advanced to justify this action, but they were all of no consequence beside the plain fact that if the House of Lords could make good its claim to reject Budgets, it would from that time forward have exercised the power of forcing a dissolution at its discretion, and the final control of the executive through the control of the purse would have passed from the elective to the hereditary House. This raised a question not only between one party and another, but between the House of Commons as such and the House of Lords as such, and in fighting it Asquith had behind him a large body of serious opinion, which, though hostile to the Liberal Party and the Budget of 1909, felt that the claim of the Peers to control Supply was a fatal menace to representative and democratic institutions. Lord St. Aldwyn spoke for a great many men of conservative disposition when he told Lord Lansdowne that "his House of Commons feeling on finance was against the rejection of the Budget," and that he thought it "both the right and the wise course to pass the Budget as it comes to us."<sup>1</sup>

The rejection of the Budget necessarily raised the whole issue of the relations between the two Houses. Ministers could not confine themselves merely to passing the Budget in the new House or even to vindicating the right of the Commons to control finance, and after that continue to "plough the sands"—as the expression then was—with measures which were doomed to destruction, so soon as they reached the House of Lords. Practically everything of importance that they could do with the consent of the Lords had been done in the previous years, and unless they could clear the road in front of them they would still, even with control over finance, be reduced to the position of mere office-holders without power to proceed with any of the principal measures, such as Home Rule and Welsh Disestablishment, which they had been advocating for the past twenty-five years. The method of the suspensory veto which covered all the relations of the two Houses had been their declared policy since 1907 and nothing short of it could have been proposed at this stage.

But Asquith was determined that in every step on the road to this the ground should be sure under his feet. He recognised that so momentous a change could not be undertaken except on the clearest proof of popular support, and though it caused him great immediate embarrassment, he made no difficulty in accepting

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Lansdowne*, p. 376.

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King Edward's view that the Royal prerogative could not be exercised to settle the relations of the two Houses on the strength of the Budget election of January 1910. But he was clear that if a second election took place, it must be under conditions which made it decisive, and that could only be, if he was assured in advance that the Royal prerogative would be exercised if the Lords resisted the decision given at the polls. There would presumably have been no difficulty about this, if King Edward had lived. When the King said that "he would not be justified in creating new Peers until after a second election," he must have meant that he would be ready to create new Peers, if the second election were held and it gave the required result. There is evidence that Asquith was prepared to consider a referendum<sup>1</sup> as an alternative to a second election, but that too must have been governed by the condition that the result should be accepted as decisive by the House of Lords.

## II

The death of King Edward broke the course of events, and Asquith then made an effort to reach a settlement by conference, thus exhausting the last of the possibilities. When this failed, nothing remained but the second dissolution, subject to an understanding with the new King that, as he had said in his statement to the House of Commons on 14th April, "the judgment of the

<sup>1</sup> Asquith's considered opinion on the Referendum may be inferred from a letter which he wrote three years later to Mr. St. Loe Strachey, who had sent him an American book on the subject :

10 DOWNING STREET,  
WHITEHALL, S.W.  
5th February, 1912.

MY DEAR STRACHEY,

I have read with interest your letter of the 26th ultimo, and I have glanced over the book by Mr. Honey on the Referendum which you enclosed.

I do not think, however, that the facts put forward there are strong enough to support your argument. The "appeal to the people" in the various states of the American union is, in reality, confined to questions of state interest. Mr. Honey expressly declares it beyond the scope of his work to discuss why the principle of the direct vote of the people is inapplicable to changes in the federal constitution. A discussion of the difficulties centred on this point would, I think, show grave reasons for not applying a device effective enough for simple and provincial communities, such as the States of New England were in 1776, to the far more elaborate conditions of our country to-day.

I need scarcely add that we differ in our estimates of the power of veto still possessed by the House of Lords.

The contrast is very striking between the numbers of those who take the trouble to vote either way on the Referendum, and of those who go to the poll on an election of representatives.

Many thanks for the book.

Yours sincerely,  
H. H. ASQUITH.

people as expressed at the elections would be carried into law in the new Parliament." But having made up his own mind on this point, he still had a choice of alternative procedures. He might advise a dissolution as things stood with the Parliament Bill produced but not debated ; or he might carry this Bill through all its stages in the existing Parliament, and defer the election until the breaking point had been reached between the two Houses. As between these two things he was unhesitatingly for the former, and insisted upon it in the teeth of strong opposition from a section of his own party which predicted disaster if the country were plunged into a second election within twelve months. One reason alone seemed to him decisive, namely, that if the election were taken on a direct issue between the two Houses and the understanding with the King obtained at that point, the action of the Crown must have become a matter of public controversy and in all probability the most hotly debated of electioneering topics. On the other hand, the understanding *before* the election and *before* the direct collision between the two Houses kept the action of the Crown at a distance, and put Ministers on strong ground in standing simply on the pledge of 14th April and declining to enter into any controversy about the subsequent action of the Crown.

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### III

It is now so generally acknowledged that the King acted rightly and constitutionally, that criticism has veered to the opposite pole, and it is suggested that Asquith acted improperly in even seeking to assure himself that the King would so act. Thus the biographer of Lord Halsbury (Mrs. Wilson Fox) is of opinion that the line taken by Lord Halsbury and his supporters in the controversies of 1911 was a mistaken one, and that they should have confined themselves to denouncing the "gratuitous suggestion"<sup>1</sup> "that the King might, when the occasion arose, refuse to accept the advice of the responsible Government of the day." This, she says, was the "real infamy."

The "infamy," at its worst consisted in supposing that the King might attach some importance to the arguments used not only by Lord Halsbury and the "die-hards," but by the Unionist leaders in general, nearly all of whom seemed to challenge the right of the Crown to exercise the prerogative in any circumstances. Moreover, it had long been the habit of the Unionist Party to

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Lord Halsbury*, pp. 266-267.



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question the validity of a Liberal majority for any purpose to which a Liberal Government endeavoured to apply it. It had been said that the election of 1906 afforded no mandate for the Education Bill, the Licensing Bill, the Plural Voting Bill and other measures which had been introduced into the subsequent Parliament. It had been said that the measures proposed went beyond or were different from the measures which the electors had been led to expect when they gave their votes. Asquith had the best reason for knowing that the validity of an election on the Parliament Bill would be challenged in all possible ways, and he was obliged to assure himself and to be in a position to assure his supporters that there would be no new issues or other means of escape from the policy laid before the country, if a sufficient majority were obtained for it.

It was thus necessary for him to ascertain whether, in the King's opinion, the method proposed by the Government satisfied the important condition that this policy should be fully and fairly laid before Parliament and the country before the election. The King, in fact, amended Asquith's proposals by requiring that the Parliament Bill should be presented to the House of Lords before the election. Asquith readily accepted this, as he would no doubt any other proposal that the King might have made for clearing the issue and giving an equal opportunity to both parties. None of these transactions afforded the slightest ground for the suggestion that Asquith for a moment doubted the King's desire and intention to do his duty as a constitutional Sovereign, but he was obliged to ascertain that there was no misunderstanding between him and the King as to the nature of the constitutional problem or as to the conditions which would call for the use of the Royal prerogative. The method of the "hypothetical understanding" of November 1910 gave him the necessary assurance on this point without involving the King in public controversy; it left the issue unprejudiced by any seeming intervention of the Crown and in no way damaged the Opposition, which had an equal opportunity of returning to power if it could win the election. If the controversy had to be, it is difficult to think of any approach to it which would have been less open to objection. In retrospect, the words which Asquith himself used in describing his interview with the King on 16th November, 1910, are seen as governing the whole situation.

"The King was pleased to inform me that he had no alternative but to assent to the advice of the Cabinet." The coercion, if any, was not that of Minister or Cabinet upon the King, but the coercion

of facts upon both. There was no Ministry possible which could have shirked the issue between Lords and Commons, and none could have advised the second dissolution of 1910 without satisfying itself that the result would this time be decisive. Even if Asquith had felt no scruple about the pledge he had given to the House of Commons on 14th April, 1910, his Government could not have survived, if he had disregarded it. 1911  
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## IV

Another, and in some ways a more formidable, line of criticism is directed to the secrecy of the November understanding. That was so strictly observed that when the disclosure was finally made it appears to have come with a shock of surprise to the Unionist leaders. Lord Lansdowne's biographer, writing in 1929, appeared still to be in doubt about the facts,<sup>1</sup> though Asquith himself had stated the most material fact in his *Fifty Years of Parliament*. It has been suggested that Asquith acted unfairly in leaving his opponents in the dark and even that the secrecy of it implied something sinister in the transaction. In fact his one thought was to keep the Crown out of the controversy, and he honestly believed that fair conditions between the two parties would be best assured that way. No one disliked secrecy more than Asquith, but in this case he deliberately chose it as the wisest course for the Crown and the fairest between parties.

But he was wrong in one respect. He had hoped that, if the election was decisive, the Unionist leaders would persuade the House of Lords to accept the inevitable, and that no disclosure would be necessary. In fact both Mr. Balfour and Lord Lansdowne admitted, as soon as the election was over, that no alternative Government was possible, and it seemed natural to suppose that, however much they disliked the course of events, they would draw the logical inference and not prolong resistance to the point of requiring the intervention of the Crown. So Asquith reasoned and continued to reason until his hands were forced by the die-hard movement in July. In this he probably attached too little importance to the strong feelings in the Unionist Party, which made cool and logical action extremely difficult at that moment. Up to, and after, the meeting of Unionist Peers on 21st July, Mr. Balfour himself seems to have been in favour of resistance up to the point of requiring "a small creation of peers," and only to have with-

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Lansdowne*, p. 411.

1911 drawn from that position in deference to Lord Lansdowne, who  
 Age 58 feared that, if there were any creation, there might be a "swamping creation"—the "large and prompt creation" of which Lord Morley spoke in the final debate. But Mr. Balfour is reported to have said later that his action in the crisis would have been quite different if he had been informed earlier of the full facts of the case and to have expressed some resentment at not having been informed.<sup>1</sup> It is arguable that the wiser course would have been to make this disclosure soon after the election of December 1910, but against this must be set the risk that the King's action would have been a subject of contention during the whole of the next eight months instead of being confined to a sharp crisis at the end. In the controversy that arose between the leaders of the Unionist Party, it would scarcely have been possible to communicate the facts to Lord Lansdowne and Mr. Balfour without permitting them to disclose them to their colleagues and to use them in argument with their supporters, and when this process had been started, it would have been difficult to set bounds to it. Nevertheless it must be admitted that the necessity for secrecy placed the King and his Secretary and even, on occasions, Asquith himself, in a difficulty in any private discussions which they may have had with the leaders of the Opposition in these months.

## V

Among Asquith's papers of the year 1911 there is a memorandum which, though probably not written by his own hand, undoubtedly expresses his view of some part of these transactions. It takes the form of answers to objections raised by a supposed opponent :

10 DOWNING STREET,  
 WHITEHALL, S.W. 1.

Most people will agree that the action of the House of Lords in the Parliament of 1906-10 led up to a situation, or perhaps one ought to say a deadlock, in which the question at issue was whether the relations between the two Houses should be defined by statute or determined by the final arbitrament of the House of Lords. A Liberal Government had no choice in the matter. If Parliamentary Government was to be carried on then legislation defining the relations of the two Houses and placing the House of Commons in the position allotted to it by the spirit and practice of the Constitution was imperative.

To go back a little—in 1907, after the rejection of the Education Bill, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's resolutions which in substance were

<sup>1</sup> Obituary notice of Lord Balfour in *The Times*, 20th March, 1930.

identical with the legislation since proposed, were adopted in the House of Commons by a very large majority; but the Lords proceeded to reject and mutilate Liberal measures of importance and ended up by throwing out the Budget of 1909. The Government dissolved, and the General Election of January 1910 followed; it turned on the House of Lords, and the Prime Minister placed before the country his proposals for dealing with them. 1911  
Age 58

The new Parliament proceeded to pass resolutions reaffirming, in a slightly modified form, the Campbell-Bannerman resolutions, and a Bill giving effect to them was introduced. Thus by April 1910, two successive Houses of Commons had pronounced on the House of Lords. (I take no account of the proceedings of earlier Parliaments.)

But *cui bono*? It was a foregone conclusion that the Lords would reject the Parliament Bill and disregard the resolution, and the Government of the day had, therefore, to be carried on with the knowledge that its main purpose was unattainable. When King Edward, in the month of February 1910, saw Mr. Asquith at Brighton, the Prime Minister told him that he had no intention of asking for assurances at that stage, and you will remember that a grave Parliamentary situation arose when, at the beginning of the Session, Mr. Asquith announced that words of his spoken at the beginning of the election had been misconstrued, and that he had never intended to make his acceptance of office conditional upon the grant of assurance. It is important to bear in mind what the Parliamentary situation really was, in view of the declaration of policy made by the Prime Minister on April 14th. To put it briefly, the House of Commons was overshadowed and almost paralysed by a sense of its own helplessness and futility. People in the House and out of it asked themselves what was the use of elections if nothing was to come of them; what would be the good of another election (which was seen to be impending) if the same issue was to be put before the country with the same results. And what was the good of doing work in the House of Commons which the House of Lords occupied itself in destroying?

It was in these circumstances that Mr. Asquith made his statement on April 14th in the House of Commons, after the Resolution dealing with the House of Lords had been carried:

"If the Lords fail to accept our policy, or decline to consider it as it is formally presented to the House, we shall feel it our duty immediately to tender advice to the Crown as to the steps which will have to be taken if that policy is to receive statutory effect in this Parliament. What the precise terms of the advice will be it will, of course, not be right for me to say now: but if we do not find ourselves in a position to ensure that statutory effect shall be given to that policy in this Parliament, we shall then either resign our offices or recommend the dissolution of Parliament. Let me add this, that in no case will we recommend a dissolution except under such conditions as will secure that in the new Parliament the judgment of the people as expressed at the elections will be carried into law."

It is no use speculating on what might have happened if King Edward's life had been prolonged. As it was, a truce which lasted for six months took place after his death, and it was only when the Conference broke up

1911 and all hope of reaching an agreed basis of settlement was abandoned  
Age 58 that the question of assurances arose. The Government, feeling it was useless to look for a legislative decision after the breakdown of the Conference, and that to continue in office on the terms of postponing the settlement of the Constitutional question was equally out of the question, had to consider their position in the light of the declaration and pledges of April, and, accordingly, in November they asked His Majesty for assurances to be exercised in the event of their being again returned to power.

Here we come to the question of alternatives.

Supposing the King had declined to act upon their advice, the resignation of the Ministry would have followed. Explanations would have been given, and the Prime Minister, following the example of Lord Grey, in 1832, would have had no choice but to explain that the King had refused to act upon the advice of His Ministers in regard to the conditional exercise of the Prerogative. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Mr. Balfour had been unsuccessful in forming a Government, we should have had the unedifying spectacle of the Prime Minister recalled to office and of the King publicly yielding to pressure—the history of the Reform Bill over again. On the other hand, had Mr. Balfour formed an Administration, he would have been compelled to go to the country in the hope of finding a majority, and it needs no great familiarity with the methods of electioneering to picture what the elections would have been like. The King would have been drawn into the conflict as the champion of the Lords, and identified with all their legislative excesses, their contempt for the constitution, their destruction of the Budget. He would have been made to figure by the Conservatives as the enemy of reform and the protector of what the other side regard as abuses and privileges. It is difficult to see how the masses of people, whose parliamentary influence and whose status as citizens had been menaced by the Lords, could have refrained from drawing the conclusion that the Crown was at the disposal of the Lords and not at the service of the people, and where would the mischief have stopped had it once broken out?

It may be said that reasonable and moderate people would have upheld the King, but does that carry us very far? Would the position of the Crown have been strengthened if reason and moderation had returned the Conservatives to power, or reduced the Liberal majority? Should we in either case have been nearer a settlement of the Constitutional question? Perhaps these questions are too speculative to be profitable, but one thing seems pretty certain, and that is that the politics of a great mass of people would have been embittered by the belief that in a great popular crisis the power of the Crown had been exercised against the people and the Constitution, and one does not see how the extirpation of this conviction could have been accomplished.

The critics of the Government may surely be asked to consider the character and weight of the verdict which, Ministers held, alone entitled them to invoke the exercise of the Royal Prerogative—the verdict of three successive Parliaments and two General Elections. If the second election had not resulted as it did, and the third Parliament had not voted as it did, there would have been no exercise of the Prerogative, and it will

certainly be interesting to see whether the historian is not more impressed by the patience of the people and the forbearance of the Government than by the precipitancy of which some contemporary critics accuse the Ministry. 1911 Age 58

Finally—has the Government been more or less precipitate in its dealing, and more or less considerate of the interests of the Crown than the Government of Lord Grey at the time of the Reform Bill? The answer is that the Reform Bill was only once before the country at a General Election.

Or has it been less considerate to the House of Lords? The answer is that the House of Lords have been given three opportunities of setting themselves right with the country—they had the resolutions of 1907, the resolutions of 1910, with an opportunity of declaring themselves on the Parliament Bill before them this year. Further, whilst the Prerogative was invoked by the Grey Ministry, on a Motion of the Lords for going into Committee, with the result that the whole Committee stage of the Bill was carried through under the threat of the creation of Peers, the House of Lords has been uncoerced at every stage of its consideration of the Parliament Bill, and the Prerogative was only invoked when the Bill came back to the Commons.

## VI

History has still to pronounce on the success or durability of the Parliament Act as a means of settling the relations of the two Houses. King Edward spoke of it as “the destruction of the House of Lords,” but that would scarcely be the opinion at the present time. Asquith’s view was that the power of holding up legislation for three sessions, or a minimum of two years from the introduction of a Bill, is a very formidable one and is likely to discourage all Governments from proposing drastic legislation for which they have not a clear mandate, or for which their mandate may be running out. The one crucial experience of the Home Rule Bill of 1912 even suggests a possibility that the prolongation for two years of a controversy which has reached an acute stage may lead to extra-Parliamentary agitation of a violent and dangerous kind. There are moments in the life of a nation when almost any settlement is better than no settlement. The coming of the Great War cut across what might have been the logical developments of the Act of 1911, and though Coalition and Conservative Governments have had ample opportunity of dealing with the question which is posed in the preamble of that measure—the substitution for the House of Lords as it at present exists of “a Second Chamber constituted on a popular instead of hereditary basis”—none of them so far has been able to solve it. The subsequent course of events raises a strong presumption that if

1911  
Age 58 Asquith's Government had attempted at one and the same time to deal with both the powers and the reconstitution of the Upper House, it would have attempted a task which would have been beyond its powers and which must have raised new issues outside and beyond any that had been settled at the previous elections. To this extent the all but unanimous protest against this enlargement of the issue which came from the Liberal Party in the early months of 1910 was based on a sound political instinct, but it undoubtedly leaves an important unsettled question to the future.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### A YEAR OF TROUBLE

The Agadir crisis—Mr. Lloyd George's speech—Asquith's declaration—A long-drawn anxiety—The controversy in the Committee of Imperial Defence—A change at the Admiralty—Unrest in the Cabinet—The military conversations—Their necessity and dangers—The Railway Strike—Mr. Balfour's resignation—Succession of Mr. Bonar Law—The "End of Compliments"—The Coal Strike and the Minimum Wage Bill—Lord Buxton's recollections. J. A. S.

THE events described in the previous chapters might well have absorbed all the energy and attention of which one man was capable, but they were by no means the whole or even the chief part of the Prime Minister's anxieties in these weeks. On 1st July, the German warship, *Panther*, appeared suddenly off the port of Agadir in Morocco, and from that time onwards till near the end of September, it remained in doubt whether the peace could be kept. Earlier in the year the French had greatly annoyed the Germans by their march to Fez, which seemed to be at least a technical violation of the Treaty of Algeciras ; but all through the month of June seemingly amicable negotiations had been going forward between M. Jules Cambon, the French Ambassador in Berlin, and Herr von Kiderlen Waechter for the "regularising" of the situation in Morocco, and the settlement of the "compensation" which Germany was to receive under the Convention of 1909 for "disinteresting herself politically" in that country.

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The reason alleged for the despatch of the *Panther*—that certain German merchants had appealed for protection—was, on the face of it, highly suspicious, since Agadir was not one of the Moroccan ports that were open to trade, and, so far as could be ascertained, there were no German residents or merchants in its vicinity. But it is a port on the Atlantic and the thought of its passing into German hands and possibly being developed as a naval base was extremely displeasing to the British Admiralty. In any case, the sudden despatch of a warship in the middle of seemingly peaceful negotiations, was, according to the notions of these times, an ominously symbolic act, which diplomatists everywhere interpreted as the deliberate hoisting of a storm-warning.



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Possibly this aspect of it was exaggerated and the German stroke may have been, as was afterwards suggested, merely a clumsy effort to speed up the negotiations with France, undertaken with characteristic disregard of its effect upon third parties. But the difficulty at the time was to ascertain which, if any, of these things it meant. On 4th July, Sir Edward Grey used serious language to the German Ambassador, Count Metternich, and definitely told him that our attitude "could not be a disinterested one." For three weeks no notice was taken of this communication, and the German Ambassador was apparently left without any instructions from his Government. Then, on 21st July, Mr. Lloyd George made his famous speech at the Lord Mayor's Dinner to the Bankers,

"If a situation were to be forced upon us in which peace could only be preserved . . . by allowing Britain to be treated, where her interests were vitally affected, as if she were of no account in the Cabinet of nations, then I say emphatically that peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable for a great country like ours to endure."

"The speech," says Lord Grey, "was entirely Lloyd George's own idea. I did nothing to instigate it,<sup>1</sup> but I welcomed it." Asquith too welcomed it without instigating it, and the general purport and tenor of it had been previously submitted to and approved by both him and Grey.<sup>2</sup> It was received with general applause in England, but was interpreted abroad as an unmistakable indication that British-German relations were at crisis point. There was uproar in Germany and the British Government was accused of intermeddling on the side of France with negotiations which were going on between Berlin and Paris. "The situation," says Asquith, "was full of grave possibilities," and "I hastened to make our position perfectly plain by the following declaration in the House of Commons on 27th July :<sup>3</sup>

"Conversations are proceeding between France and Germany; we are not a party to those conversations: the subject matter of them (i.e. territorial arrangements in other parts of West Africa than Morocco) may not affect British interests. . . . It is our desire that these conversations should issue in a settlement honourable and satisfactory to both parties, and of which His Majesty's Government can cordially say that it in no way prejudices British interests. We believe that to be possible. We earnestly and sincerely desire to see it accomplished. . . . We have thought it right from the beginning to make quite clear that, failing such a settlement as I have indicated, we must become an active party

<sup>1</sup> *Twenty-five Years*, I, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> *The Genesis of the War*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>3</sup> *Genesis of the War*, p. 94.

in the discussion of the situation. That would be our right as a signatory of the Treaty of Algeciras ; it might be our obligation under the terms of our agreement of 1904 with France ; it might be our duty in defence of British interests directly affected by further developments.” 1911 Age 58-59

“ This statement,” Asquith adds, “ was accepted without demur by the German Government with which we had no further difficulties in the matter.”

## II

These words must be interpreted as applying only to the British and German Governments. As between these two the incident was technically and diplomatically over after 27th July. But the negotiations between the French and German Governments dragged on for the next ten weeks, and there were many anxious moments in which failure seemed all but inevitable and very likely to involve Great Britain in war. None were more anxious than the days in August when the fate of the Parliament Bill was being decided. While Lords and Commons were at grips, Sir Edward Grey was warning the Admiralty that “ the fleet might be attacked at any moment,” Jules Cambon was telling his Government that a conflict was in sight, and the German Ambassador talking of the situation as very nearly hopeless. So it went on till near the end of September and during all that time the fleet remained in a position of war-preparedness, and Sir Edward Grey repeated his warnings that no precaution should be relaxed.<sup>1</sup> At the same time military conversations were going forward between the British and French General Staffs, and preparations for landing four or six divisions on the Continent were worked out in the minutest detail. It was not till the beginning of October that the French and German Governments arrived at a settlement.

Asquith himself took an active part in these precautionary measures, and a few days after Parliament rose (23rd August) he convened a secret meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, to which, in addition to the Foreign Secretary and the Ministers concerned with the fighting forces, Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Winston Churchill were summoned. Mr. Churchill, who was always on the alert when the smell of gunpowder was in the air, had sent the Prime Minister a memorandum containing his views ten days

<sup>1</sup> See Mr. Harold Nicolson's *Life of Lord Carnock*, pp. 346-7. “ Our preparations were far more advanced than was realised by British public opinion. It was not known, for instance, that from September 8 to September 22 of 1911 we were in constant expectation of hostilities, and that the tunnels and bridges on the South Eastern Railway were being patrolled day and night.”

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earlier, and he has left a lively account of what followed in his book, the *World Crisis*.<sup>1</sup> A sharp division of opinion immediately declared itself between the soldiers represented by General Sir Henry Wilson, the Director of Military Operations, and the sailors, represented by Sir Arthur Wilson. The former expounded the plan for sending six British Divisions to fight in France immediately war was declared, and wished for an assurance from the Admiralty that they could be transported by a certain date in September if the necessity arose; the latter replied that no such assurance could be given unless in the meantime preparations were made which would proclaim to the world that we were expecting war; and Mr. McKenna declined to take the responsibility for these. The Admiral stood stubbornly on the ancient tradition that the enemy's fleet must be disposed of before a great army could be transported. The General declared the landing of the Expeditionary Force at the first moment after the outbreak of war to be vital to the plan for co-operating with the French which had hypothetically been arranged with the French General Staff. Lord Haldane as Secretary for War vehemently backed his General Staff, and Mr. McKenna stood as staunchly behind his Admirals. The former said that the Admiralty must have a General Staff corresponding to the General Staff of the Army; the latter that there was no analogy between Army and Navy and that the Generals wholly misunderstood the method of handling and governing the fleet. When the Committee adjourned, none of these questions was settled.

This on 27th August, while there was yet a fortnight to run of what the War Office considered to be a dangerous crisis, was not reassuring, and it filled the Prime Minister with apprehension, which was not relieved when Haldane intimated that he could not be responsible for the War Office unless the Admiralty would work in harmony with his General Staff and set about providing itself with a Naval War Staff. It is the common belief that when Naval or Military questions arise, a Prime Minister has nothing to do but deliver himself into the hands of experts who will decide for him, but much more often he finds himself called upon to decide between rival experts advancing contradictory propositions on equal authority. Asquith undoubtedly inclined to the War Office view, which was backed by a majority of the Committee of Defence, but what he saw most clearly at this moment was the disaster of divided counsels between War Office and Admiralty and the absolute

<sup>1</sup> *World Crisis*, 1911-14, Chapter III.

necessity of putting an end to it. He had the highest respect for Mr. McKenna, whose persistence in maintaining the fleet at the level required by the German competition had been an enormous service to the country and to the Government, but he feared the clash between him and Lord Haldane if these two tenacious personalities remained at their respective posts. On the other hand he shrank from taking the step which was generally expected by those behind the scenes in these weeks, that of sending Lord Haldane to the Admiralty and asking him to do there the same re-organizing work that he had done at the War Office. He felt that this was too much like a vote of censure on that Department and too likely to cause friction with the Admirals. In the meantime Mr. Churchill, who was keen on the scent, had visited Asquith at Archerfield in Scotland, where he had gone for a short holiday after Parliament rose; and at the beginning of October, Asquith surprised both his colleagues and the public by appointing him to the Admiralty, and asking Mr. McKenna to accept the Home Secretaryship.

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It was an odd turn of the wheel which brought to the Admiralty the man who only two years earlier had been one of the leaders in the fight against the eight Dreadnoughts, and displaced the man who had fought that fight so gamely and successfully. The most momentous consequence of this change for Asquith and his Government was not to be revealed till three and a half years later, but in the meantime the new First Lord went to work with a feverish activity which was not quenched by the discovery that the creation of a Naval War Staff was, as his predecessor had warned him, a far different thing from what had been supposed on War Office analogies. On 5th November, Mr. Churchill wrote to Asquith from the Admiralty:

*Mr. Churchill to Asquith.*

"The enclosed memorandum from Sir Arthur Wilson is decisive in its opposition not only to any particular scheme, but against the whole principle of a War Staff for the Navy. Ottley's rejoinder which I also send you shows that it would not be difficult to continue the argument. But I feel that this might easily degenerate into personal controversy, and would in any case be quite unavailing. I like Sir Arthur Wilson personally, and should be very sorry to run the risk of embittering relations which are now pleasant. I therefore propose to take no public action during his tenure."

### III

The transfer of Mr. Churchill to the Admiralty was by no means the only result of the Agadir crisis. Mr. Lloyd George's part in it

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had prevented any serious division of opinion in the Cabinet and left critics and objectors without leadership, while it lasted. But the suddenness and gravity of this affair had been a severe shock to several members of the Cabinet, and led to much searching of heart afterwards. The Algeciras crisis in the first month of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's Government had come and passed before Ministers, new to office, had had time to realise what was happening; the Bosnia-Herzegovina crisis in the autumn and winter of 1908-1909, though dangerous in some of its phases, had been too remote and long drawn out to be recognised as acute at any given moment. But Agadir coming as a bolt from the blue and threatening, as seemed at the time, to plunge the country into war in a few days stirred and shocked as neither of the others. Ministers began to ask where they were going, and some complained that they had been left in the dark, and raised the old grievance that Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and War Secretary were all of the Liberal Imperialist persuasion.

The series of accidents which prevented the "military conversations" of January 1906 from coming to the knowledge of the Cabinet has already been mentioned, and the secrecy practised on this occasion became in after years a subject of serious complaint on the part of some Ministers. But Asquith was always impatient of the suggestion that his Cabinet had been kept in the dark about foreign affairs during his Prime Ministership. Both he and Sir Edward Grey had been scrupulous in consulting it about all important transactions; every engagement entered into was known to it, and had been sanctioned by it; the papers circulated to Ministers had been voluminous. The scheme of army reorganization which Mr. Haldane had carried through at the War Office frankly contemplated the despatch of an army to the Continent and prepared an Expeditionary Force for that purpose and the means of reinforcing it. As we look back on these times their secrets seem to have been very open ones to those who had eyes to see. But the burden of home politics in these years was immense, and Ministers absorbed in their departments could not always find leisure to read with close attention the papers circulated in the red boxes<sup>1</sup> or to follow the set of the currents in world affairs. The tendency inevitably was for other Ministers to leave these affairs in the hands of the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary until some

<sup>1</sup> It is said that an ingenious clerk at the Foreign Office devised a private test to discover which Ministers did and which did not read the Foreign Office papers.

sharp, sudden, and unexpected crisis brought home to them all their collective responsibility. 1911  
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Complaints now centred upon the "military conversations" and some Ministers realised for the first time that they were taking place. They were bound to take place. No Government could have done its duty, when faced with the possibility of war, if it had not taken steps to see that a plan was concerted with its probable ally. Asquith of course was aware of and sanctioned all the conversations that took place while he was Prime Minister. But he was also aware of the danger that zealous soldiers, like the late Sir Henry Wilson, would overstep the line between hypothesis and fact and in the guise of strategy commit Government and Parliament to a policy which lay outside their instructions. More than once he issued warnings<sup>1</sup> to both War Office and Foreign Office on this subject, but no precautions could altogether avoid this danger. If co-operation between British and French was the most probable military hypothesis, as undoubtedly it was, in those years, any hypothetical disposition of forces on that basis incurred the danger that one or other of the parties would feel aggrieved, if, when the time came, its partner claimed freedom of action or freedom to stand out. All that could be done on our side was to keep repeating that all plans were hypothetical and that nothing could be guaranteed before the event, and Asquith insisted on this being reiterated, but the mere fact that the two nations had constantly to consider the hypothesis of war in common increased the probability that, when the time came, they would act together.

The objectors to the "Conversations" were undoubtedly right in laying stress on this danger, but as Sir Edward Grey pointed out, it was impossible to suspend them in the circumstances in which the Government found itself in the summer and autumn of 1911. In the October Cabinets there were warmer debates on this subject than on almost any other since the Government was formed, but Asquith could do no more than promise to keep his colleagues carefully informed, and with this the objectors had to be content for the time being. Whatever ground for complaint there may have been in the previous years, there can be no question that from this time onwards all Ministers were fully aware that in times of crisis there would be and must be a close interchange of views between the British and the French military authorities.

<sup>1</sup> See Viscount Grey's *Twenty-five Years*, I, p. 95.

## IV

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To complete the record of August 1911 the first great railway strike must be added to the struggle between Lords and Commons and the anxiety of the Agadir crisis. Never in the memory of men living had a Ministry been beset with so many and great dangers as Asquith's Government in these weeks. For many months previously there had been increasing unrest among all sections of transport workers, but no one had anticipated the sudden movement of the railwaymen which on 17th August threatened to paralyse the whole railway service of the country at twenty-four hours' notice. There was no precedent for it, and none of the measures had been devised which fifteen years later enabled another Government to deal with an even greater emergency. But Asquith and his colleagues realised at once that this was no ordinary labour dispute in which the Government could play the part of impartial spectator. A few days of it and it must have produced all the results of a general strike, complete stoppage of industry, failure of food supplies, and only too probably rioting and bloodshed. The Government set to work on two lines, first to secure a sufficient service under, if need be, military protection to avert the worst consequences, and second and simultaneously to bring the parties together. Mr. Churchill, the immediately responsible Minister as Home Secretary, rose to the occasion and applied himself energetically to the first of these tasks; and Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Sydney Buxton were active in negotiations. Asquith spoke with equal frankness to both sides, but what he said to the men obtained a wider publicity than what he said to their employers, and not for the first time his demeanour was said to have been unnecessarily stern. Mr. Keir Hardie went to the length of asserting that "the Prime Minister had declared that if there was to be a strike, the Government would have the railways kept open, even if they had to shoot down every striker." Under cross-examination by Mr. Lloyd George, Mr. Keir Hardie floundered deeply and had finally to admit that the words which he had attributed to the Prime Minister were his own gloss upon the latter's very different statement that "he would employ all the forces of the Crown to keep the railways open." This undoubtedly he did say and meant, as the sequel proved. Troops were employed, and necessarily employed where rioting could not otherwise be dealt with, and four men were killed. Asquith did also convey a hint which may be supposed to have had weight with responsible men on both sides that the country

was in a situation in which the continuance of these troubles might be extremely damaging to the national interest.

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Whichever of these arguments may have prevailed the strike was called off after two days and the differences between the parties referred to a Royal Commission which settled them amicably for the time being. So far as the merits of the case were concerned, Asquith's sympathy throughout was largely with the men, many of whom he thought to be underpaid and overworked, but he had no doubt whatever that the first duty of the Government was to prevent disorder, and keep the railways open.

V

In a speech to the Executive Committee of the City of London Conservative Association on 8th November, 1911, Mr. Balfour announced his resignation of the leadership of the Conservative Party. The reasons which he alleged for taking this step—the burden of years, desire for repose, the need of new blood in high places—were supplemented in the minds of politicians with reflections on the difficulties of leading the Tory Party, which was still in a state of active recrimination between different schools of Tariff Reformers and had failed to find rest in the supposed sovereign remedy of the referendum.<sup>1</sup> Asquith paid a generous tribute to his old friend and life-long opponent in his speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet on the following day:<sup>2</sup>

"I am not going to follow the rather unhappy example which is set in many quarters this morning by contributing another obituary notice of a career of which I hope and believe there are many chapters still to be written by the pen of history. I will only venture to predict that it will be long before we shall see again in the forefront of political strife a personality so invaluable to his friends, so formidable to his foes, so interesting and attractive to friends and foes alike, or such a unique combination of gifts and powers as has made Mr. Balfour by universal consent the most distinguished member of the greatest deliberative Assembly in the world."

Mr. Bonar Law, who succeeded Mr. Balfour in the leadership of the Unionist Party, took an early opportunity of announcing that the era of compliments between politicians was ended, and greatly delighted an enthusiastic audience at the Albert Hall at the end of

<sup>1</sup> Before the December election of 1910, Mr. Balfour had announced in a speech at the Albert Hall (29th November, 1910), that in the event of the return of the Unionist Party to power, the question of food taxes would be submitted to a referendum. This was greeted with cries of "that wins the election." It did not win the election, and led to much heart-searching in the Unionist Party during the subsequent months.

<sup>2</sup> City, 9th November, 1911.



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January with a speech which was described at the time as full of "biting japes and stinging scores." The Government were "artful Dodgers," "Gadarene Swine," "Humbugs," and "tricksters." This was the new note which was to become shriller with every month until July 1914.

The work laid out for the Parliamentary session of 1912—Home Rule, Welsh Disestablishment, the Reform of the Franchise—was formidable enough, but before any of it could be approached, the country was plunged into another great industrial dispute, which took all Asquith's energy and thoughts for the first weeks of the session. On 10th January the Miners' Federation took a ballot of its members to decide whether notice should be given "to establish the principle of an individual minimum wage for every man and boy working underground in every district in Great Britain," with the result that an immense majority declared themselves in favour of this course. A strike therefore threatened, covering not merely one coalfield, like previous strikes, but all the coalfields of England, Scotland, and Wales, with the prospect, if it lasted long enough, of bringing transport and industry to a standstill. For the next six weeks the Government did everything in its power to bring the men and the owners together, but they failed to agree in joint conference among themselves, and rejected the terms which the Government proposed. On 29th February the notices expired and the strike was general all over the country.

The Government kept touch with both owners and men, and Asquith, assisted by Sir Edward Grey, Mr. Lloyd George, and Mr. Sydney Buxton, took charge of the negotiations. For three days (12th-15th March) the opposing parties sat in conference and Asquith exhausted the arts of persuasion and argument without avail to bring them together. He told the owners quite frankly that he considered the minimum wages demanded by the men (5s. for men and 3s. for boys) to be, on the face of them, reasonable, but at the same time he told the men that he was not prepared to enforce these wages or any specific wage by Act of Parliament. What he was prepared to do was to get a Bill passed providing that a minimum wage should be fixed for the various districts at Conferences between the parties presided over by an independent chairman appointed by the Government. When this had been rejected by both parties, he suspended the Conference, and three days later (21st March) introduced a Bill practically to the same effect and got it passed through both Houses within a week. Mr. Balfour, in spite of his recent resignation, returned to his place to move the

rejection of the Bill, and the whole Unionist Party voted against it; but neither he nor any Opposition leader or speaker had any alternative to suggest, and when the Bill reached the Lords, Lord Lansdowne advised that it should be let pass and the responsibility for it be thrown on to the Government.

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Notwithstanding that the Labour Party had voted against it on the third reading, the Bill ended the strike, for the Miners' Federation took a ballot of their members to decide whether they would return to work pending the decision of the district Boards; and though there was still a majority for holding out, it was considered too small to justify a continuance of the struggle, and the men were back at work by the middle of April. As for the responsibility, Asquith was only too willing to take it, and the general opinion was that he had handled a dangerous emergency in a masterly manner. In his view the difference between fixing the amount of a wage and providing the machinery for fixing it in an Act of Parliament was vital. Only a "local body armed with local knowledge" could understand such a task. To put a specific figure into an Act of Parliament would not be in the interests of the men and would expose Parliament to a most undesirable form of agitation:

"I want to point out to my hon. friends who represent the miners the peculiar dangers to which, from their point of view, the adoption of this proposal may lead. Once put in an Act of Parliament as expressing the considered judgment of Parliament that a particular figure—say 5s.—was a fair *minimum* wage for a particular class of workmen, and you may depend upon it that that will be treated as a *maximum*, and an intimation that Parliament thinks that that is fair and right, and you will have enormous difficulty in getting anybody, when the matter comes before other tribunals and comparisons are made between that wage and the wages of other classes of workmen, persuaded that that tribunal ought to entertain any other figure than the 5s. I think it would be very disastrous in the interests of the men themselves. There is another point, too, that affects the men, and which, I think, also affects the general community. If we were once to put a figure such as this into an Act of Parliament, is it not perfectly clear to those of us who know much about electioneering that it must become the subject of agitation, and—I do not want to use offensive phrases—of bidding and counter-bidding in constituencies where the particular class of workers affected are largely represented. It is the most natural thing in the world to go to constituencies and say, 'What, 5s., it is not enough. Suppose we say 6s.' I am afraid you would get the competition of rival bidders, with the most demoralising results to the general community and to the political life of the country." (House of Commons, 22nd March, 1912.)

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Legislative recognition of the principle of the statutory wage, and the fixing of the amount of that wage by a competent local body sufficed to settle the dispute and keep the peace during a vitally important period, though the future was to bring new and more stubborn conflicts.

Lord Buxton, who was President of the Board of Trade and the Minister primarily responsible, supplies some memories of this occasion which may fittingly find a place here :

“ The strike was a very serious one, and matters had come to a complete deadlock between the coal owners and the miners. It became evident to me that some further authority than that of the President of the Board of Trade alone was necessary in order to bring a solution. The Prime Minister agreed, and he, Sir Edward Grey and Mr. Lloyd George (then Chancellor of the Exchequer) were called in to see what influence they could bring to bear towards a settlement. The position was a most difficult one—suspicion and antagonism prevailed on both sides. From the beginning to the end, Asquith did not spare himself and devoted himself with inexhaustible patience to his attempt to bring together the two sides. His handling of the situation was flawless—tactful, conciliatory, and yet firm. He had constant consultation with the coal owners and the miners, either separately or together.

At the various Conferences it was interesting to note what a strikingly acute judgment he showed of personalities. We used to sit round a table ; the miners and the coal owners on separate sides, and we at the top of the table. I sat next to the Prime Minister, and he used to jot down his view of the various speakers—coal miners or coal owners—who took a part in the discussion, and pass them on to me for my inspection. Most of the disputants were strangers to him ; and his comments, critical or appreciative, were throughout invariably correct : ‘ A dreary gas-bag ’ ; ‘ an acute mind ’ ; ‘ an unsuitable leader ’ ; ‘ sensible, realises the position ’ ; ‘ a stubborn donkey ’ ; were the sort of epithets with which he summed up his judgment. I was sometimes a little afraid that these notes might go astray and get into the hands of those to whom they applied. Mr. Smillie, it may be noted, was one of those to whom he gave the best marks for his ability, knowledge and recognition of mutual difficulties.

It was my business to know the names of those present, and I would write down for him their names in the order in which they sat, or whisper it to him, as one or other got up to speak ; and, as the speaker rose, he was quick enough to call him by name—a personal touch much appreciated both by coal owners and miners.

In spite, however, of his admirable handling of the situation, agreement was not reached ; and he finally took the matter into his own hands and had a Bill drafted and carried, which expressed the views of the Government. The Bill was not acceptable to either side at the time, but it brought the strike to an end.”

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### SOCIAL REFORM

Welsh Disestablishment—The Trade Union Levy Bill—National Insurance and its difficulties—The Land Committee and the Labourer's Minimum Wage—Asquith's consent—The Franchise Bill and Woman Suffrage—An unexpected disaster—A duel with a colleague—The Marconi affair—Asquith's view—"Rules of obligation and rules of prudence"—Death of Mr. Alfred Lyttelton—Asquith's tribute.  
J. A. S.

AFTER the passing of the Parliament Act, Ireland became the dominant theme in Home affairs, and this occupied the chief part of Asquith's time and thought throughout the years 1912, 1913, and the first half of 1914. The story of this will be told consecutively in future chapters, but his Government was unceasingly at work during the same period on a great variety of other projects—the accumulated arrears of programmes held up till now by the House of Lords—which may be glanced at in the meantime.

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One of the incidental results of the Parliament Act was to require Parliament to work at the highest pressure during the subsequent session, so that measures threatened by the House of Lords might have the benefit of its provisions within the term of the Parliament. Not only the Home Rule Bill but the Welsh Disestablishment Bill was carried through the House of Commons during the session of 1912, and another hotly disputed measure, the Trade Unions Bill, reversing—subject to a provision for dissentients to "contract out"—the Osborne judgment, which had deprived Trade Unions of the right of levying their members for political purposes, was given the same priority. In the last case the precaution proved unnecessary, for the House of Lords followed the precedent it had set in 1906 of not challenging organised Labour and passed the Bill under protest. Asquith was strongly of opinion, as he told the House of Commons at the beginning of the session, that "the limitation which the Osborne judgment put upon Trade Unions was not a politic one nor one that was contemplated at the time of the legislation by which the present status of the Trade Unions was

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conferred upon them.”<sup>1</sup> But he objected to the proposal of the Labour Party merely to reverse the judgment, and in face of considerable opposition from the Radical as well as the Labour benches, held firmly to the condition that a dissentient minority should not be compelled to subscribe to a political purpose of which it did not approve. He was ready to accept the principle that assent should be assumed, unless dissent was notified, but where the dissentient felt strongly enough to declare his objection, he was clear that a remedy should be provided.

Parliament sat continuously from 14th February, 1912, to 7th March, 1913, with a summer recess of two months, and the heat which was generated by the Irish question extended to all other subjects. It is by this time all but universally agreed that the Welsh Church Bill, which, like the Home Rule Bill, was still in the suspensory stage when war broke out, settled on fair and even generous terms a controversy which could have only one ending, if the Welsh Nonconformists, represented by a large majority in Parliament, persisted in their demand. But at the time it was bitterly resisted and even denounced as an act of robbery and sacrilege; and when in later years Asquith became a candidate for the Chancellorship of Oxford University nothing more weighed the scales against him with the clerical voters than the reproach of being the author of Welsh Disestablishment.

Unceasing effort outside as well as in Parliament was needed to maintain the position of the Government in these months. The passing of Mr. Lloyd George's Insurance Bill in the previous session, though a great and beneficent administrative achievement, had been not the end but the beginning of trouble, and all through 1912, the Government found itself on the defensive against a violent campaign of opposition and prejudice. Though disclaiming all responsibility and denouncing many of its provisions the Unionist Party had shrunk from a frontal attack on the Bill when it was passing through Parliament in the previous year, but the temporary unpopularity of the new and imperfectly understood system gave it an opening of which it took full advantage at by-elections, and the Government suffered serious reverses at a time when it most needed support. This proved to be but a passing storm. The party rose to the occasion without flinching, organised an Insurance Committee which soon had its emissaries all over the country combating prejudice and explaining the nature of the Act. In all this Mr. Lloyd George was indefatigable, and at the beginning of 1913 he

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons, 14th February, 1912.

was able to report that the tide had turned, and to make handsome acknowledgment to all who had contributed to the result : 1912-1913  
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“It was very largely due to the efforts of the Liberal Insurance Committee, but it was also due to the staunchness, the loyalty, the courage of the Liberal members in the House of Commons, that we withstood the tide. Never for a single moment was there any flinching or wavering, and, as for my colleagues in the Cabinet, let me say here that I never heard a single syllable of doubt, of hesitation, or complaint. They were perfectly unanimous. They gave me their support with cheerfulness from beginning to end. Above all, let me acknowledge the support I received from our great Chief. There are parties in this country that run away from their principles like hares at a single adverse by-election. That is not the Liberal Party. We lost by-election after by-election; we received startling defeats, almost stunning defeats. But our majorities (in the House of Commons) never dropped. No one said, ‘For Heaven’s sake, drop the Bill.’ They just set their teeth and said, ‘Here is something to believe in, something to risk defeat for.’” (National Liberal Club, 17th Jan., 1913.)

## II

In the same year and also at the instigation of Mr. Lloyd George, another Committee got to work under the Chairmanship of Mr. Arthur Acland, to prepare a scheme of Land Reform for submission to the Cabinet. That produced an elaborate Report on the Rural Land Question ending up with proposals which were accepted in substance by Ministers, and made the basis of the “Land Campaign” which Mr. Lloyd George opened at Bedford in the second week of October 1913. The Report<sup>1</sup> was published in the same month, and though there have been other Reports since then, few have surveyed the ground more completely or made proposals which go more to the root of the matter. This was not Asquith’s child, but he took a benevolent interest in it from the beginning and was informed of all stages of the Inquiry and of the conclusions

<sup>1</sup> *The Report of the Land Enquiry Committee*. Vol. I, Rural. Hodder and Stoughton. 1s. It proposed to set up a Ministry of Land with large powers to be exercised by Commissioners, acting judicially, over Small Holdings, Land Purchase, disputes between landlord and tenant affecting the proper development of the resources of land; reclamation, afforestation, and development. The Commissioners were to fix minimum wages for labourers in different districts, and to regulate their hours of labour, and were to be armed with the power of compulsory purchase at a fair price in order to provide allotments and small holdings. Farmers given notice to quit were to be able to appeal to the Commissioners who could award them compensation for disturbance of goodwill, if they thought his notice capricious or unfair. The small farmer was to have the right of having his rent revised by the Commissioners, and the large farmer of appealing to them against the raising of his rent or in case of severe depression. A complete survey was to be made of the land of the country and special provision made for rural housing.

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to which it was tending. Having been a member of this Committee I was present at the gathering of Ministers in Lord Haldane's house just after the prorogation of Parliament in August 1913, when the proposals in their final form were laid before Asquith. He was a friendly but acute critic whose questions were searching and formidable, but his general approval was never in doubt and he accepted with little demur the labourer's minimum wage about which he had been wrongly supposed to hold a rather stubborn opinion. I remember on this occasion, as on many others of the same kind, being struck by Asquith's quick transitions between patience and impatience. He was extremely impatient of explanations which were prolonged after he had grasped the point, and amazingly patient in unravelling even small ambiguities and obscurities. It was the general opinion at this gathering that the Land Campaign would occupy a large part of the year 1914, and hold the chief place in the programme which the Government would lay before the country at the next election. *Dis aliter visum.*

### III

The closing days of the 1912-1913 sessions brought a Parliamentary disaster which affected Asquith not a little. In the previous June the Government had introduced a Franchise and Registration Bill which abolished plural voting and university representation, and by reducing the qualifying period and simplifying the conditions would have increased the number of voters from  $7\frac{1}{2}$  to 10 millions. It was a measure on which the Liberal Party had set its heart; much time had been spent on it during the autumn and winter and there was no doubt of its passing the House of Commons by a large majority. But when the Bill was introduced Asquith had given a pledge that the advocates of Woman Suffrage should have an opportunity of moving an amendment enfranchising women, and that the decision on this point should be left to a free vote of the House. On 23rd January, when the Government proposed to set up a time-table for the remaining stages of the Bill, Mr. Bonar Law asked the Speaker, Mr. Lowther, whether certain amendments which the Government themselves had introduced, and especially an amendment abolishing the occupation franchise, had not made "such a material difference" to the Bill that in accordance with the practice of the House a new Bill ought to be introduced and read a second time. The Speaker in answering this question said that he would defer his ruling until the amendments

in question were actually reached, but took occasion to say that "there were also other amendments relating to Female Suffrage which, of course, would make a huge difference." Three days later, following up this hint, Asquith put the direct question whether the passing of any of the Woman Suffrage amendments would, in the Speaker's view, require the Bill to be withdrawn, and received the answer that the passing of any which actually enfranchised women would have this effect.

This ruling came as a complete surprise to Asquith. It had not occurred to him that a Bill which was a Bill for enfranchisement and which introduced a large new male element into the electorate would by the inclusion of women be considered to have become a new Bill. But the ruling was final and it obviously placed him in the position that, if he either saved the Bill by procuring the withdrawal of the Woman Suffrage amendments, or invited the House to discuss them after an intimation that their passing would wreck the Bill, he would be open to the charge of having escaped from his pledge to give the women a "full opportunity." As an opponent of Woman Suffrage he felt under a special obligation to be scrupulous in this matter, but his colleagues without exception shared his opinion that the Bill should be withdrawn and he announced the decision of the Government immediately after the Speaker had given his ruling :

"I do not think it would be fair and right, and certainly I do not think it would be acting up to the spirit of the obligations which we undertook—which were in substance that in any Bill for the extension of the franchise we would give a full and free opportunity for the discussion and, if it was the view of the majority of the House, for the introduction of woman's suffrage—if after that door had been finally closed, so far as this Bill is concerned we were to proceed with the enfranchisement of the male electorate. Therefore, as a mere matter of common honour and common sense, if we agree that the discussion of the woman suffrage amendment is precluded by the ruling which you, Sir, have given, we cannot in fairness proceed with the Bill as it stands and with its other provisions." (House of Commons, 27th Jan., 1913.)

The practical effect was unimportant, for before the electorate was next polled, the women had effected their entry and far more sweeping reforms been introduced than were dreamt of in the Bill of 1913. But it is worth noting that if the Speaker had not been asked for his ruling at this stage and the Woman Suffrage amendments had been put to the House, they would certainly have been rejected, for in the following session Mr. Dickinson's Bill for Woman Suffrage, which was given the promised "full and free

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opportunity," was refused a second reading by a majority of 268 to 221.

The debate on that occasion (6th May, 1913) is worth recalling since it provided Asquith with the opportunity of explaining the grounds of his own opposition to Woman Suffrage. He gave them a characteristically logical and formal expression, but no one who heard him on this occasion or had ever talked to him on the subject could doubt that these grounds were in reality sentimental. He had a profound respect for the mind and intelligence of women, and few men of his ability and attainments deferred more readily to their judgment. But he considered politics to be peculiarly the male sphere, and it offended his sense of decorum and chivalry to think of them as engaged in the rough and tumble of this masculine business and exposed to its publicity. He always vehemently denied that the question had any relation to democratic theory or that the exclusion of women from the franchise was any reflection on their sex. As he put it to the House :

"Democracy . . . aims at the obliterations of arbitrary and artificial distinctions. Democracy has no quarrel whatever with distinctions which nature has created and which experience has sanctioned. If I may put in one sentence what seems to me to be the gist and core of the real question the House has to answer to-night, it is this : Would our political fabric be strengthened, would our legislation be more respected, would our social and domestic life be enriched, would our standards of manners—and in manners I include the old-fashioned virtues of chivalry, courtesy, and all the reciprocal dependence and reliance of the two sexes—would that standard be raised and refined if women were politically enfranchised ? That is the real question the House has to ask itself."

His answer to this question was "No," but not a final or dogmatic No:—There were two conditions, he told the House, which, if satisfied, might cause him to alter his opinions. One was that clear proof should be shown "of a settled demand for the change by an overwhelming majority of women" of which at the time he saw no evidence ; and the other that it should be shown that "the absence of direct representation in the House of Commons had caused or was causing a neglect by Parliament of the special interests and needs of women"—of which again he saw no evidence. His final words were :

"If those two conditions are not satisfied, and I am quite sure they are not satisfied here, my general argument remains and is unassailable. I have never thought or said that if the Parliament of this country should choose to enfranchise women, whether upon a small or upon a

large scale, for myself, I see no possible, logical halting place, if you once accept the principle, between the complete assimilation for all political purposes both of the right to elect and the right to be elected—I have never said that if Parliament deliberately adopted that principle, and with the sanction of the country adopted that principle, we were going to come to the end of civilisation, or that the foundations of society and the integrity of the Empire would be loosened. I do not believe anything of the kind. 1912-1913  
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There are very few issues in politics upon which more exaggerated language is used both upon the one side and the other. I am sometimes tempted to think, as one listens to the arguments of the supporters of Women Suffrage, that there is nothing to be said for it. I sometimes am tempted to think, when I listen to the arguments of the opponents of Women Suffrage, that there is nothing to be said against it. There is a great deal of exaggeration, both upon the one side and upon the other. The question I have endeavoured to put, I hope without undue passion or prejudice, is a serious practical question: Would it or would it not inure to the benefit first of women as a class, next of the community as a whole to make this great change, for which, I repeat once more, you have no producible evidence of the authority and declaration of the electorate. In the best interests of the State and of society, I shall record my vote against the second reading of this Bill." (House of Commons, 6th May, 1913.)

There followed a reply from Sir Edward Grey, which made the occasion memorable to those who were present as that of a fascinating duel between these two eminent leaders and friends on a subject of absorbing interest.

#### IV

In his *Memories and Reflections*<sup>1</sup> Asquith has given a full and careful account of the Marconi Episode which added not a little to his troubles and anxieties in the years 1912-1913. The facts were briefly these. Early in the year 1912 the Marconi Company were invited to tender for the establishment of a chain of State-owned wireless telegraph stations within the Empire, and their tender was accepted by the Postmaster-General subject to its embodiment in a contract to be laid before the House of Commons for ratification. As soon as the terms of the contract became known motions for its rejection were put down, but the debate was held over till after the summer adjournment. By the time it was reached all manner of scandalous rumours affecting the honour of certain Ministers were afloat in the House of Commons and had been circulated by a section of the Press. It was suggested (1) that these Ministers had corruptly favoured the Marconi Company in obtaining the contract because

<sup>1</sup> Page 207, *et seq.*

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the Managing Director, Mr. Godfrey Isaacs, was the brother of the Attorney-General, Sir Rufus Isaacs, and (2) that, taking advantage of their knowledge as Ministers, they had dealt on the Stock Exchange in the shares of the favoured Company and made considerable profits for themselves. The first charge was directed mainly against Mr. Herbert Samuel, the Postmaster-General, who would have taken it to the Law Courts if Asquith, who was consulted, had not at once characterised it as "scurrilous rubbish" of which "you should take no notice." It was in fact wholly ridiculous and no attempt was ever made to justify it. There was more persistence in the second charge, which was aimed not at the Postmaster-General, but at Sir Rufus Isaacs, and in association with him Mr. Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Master of Elibank, who had recently resigned the office of Chief Whip to go into business. The Government decided that the atmosphere of suspicion must be dispelled and proposed the appointment of a Select Committee of fifteen to "investigate the circumstances connected with the negotiations and completion" of the contract, and to "report thereon and whether the Agreement is desirable and should be approved."

Asquith had convinced himself that there was not the slightest foundation for either of the foregoing allegations, and he was quite confident that they would be blown out of court by the Select Committee. But unfortunately the Ministers had bought shares in the American Marconi Company (having satisfied themselves that its sphere of operations was confined to the working of Marconi patents in the United States and that it had no interest in any contracts which the British Company made with the British Government) and they omitted to mention this fact when on 11th October they spoke in the debate on the appointment of the Select Committee. It became known, however, in the following year when Sir Rufus Isaacs disclosed it in giving evidence in the action which he and Mr. Herbert Samuel brought against the French newspaper *Le Matin*, for repeating the original allegations. The *Matin* admitted its mistake and made a full and frank apology, but the new fact thus disclosed, though not bearing on the original slanders, was undoubtedly a very unpleasant surprise which threatened serious consequences in Parliament.

On this point Asquith's own words must be quoted :

"In the debate on the appointment of the Select Committee, Sir Rufus Isaacs and Mr. Lloyd George confined themselves to denying the suggestion that they had ever had any interest, direct or indirect, in

the English Marconi Company ; that being the whole gravamen of the accusations and insinuation that had up to that time been made against them. Neither of them thought it necessary or relevant to refer to the American transaction, which was unknown both to their traducers and their friends, and had no bearing upon the charges which they were challenged to meet. This was undoubtedly an error of judgment, as both subsequently acknowledged : but it is to be remembered that they were both looking forward to an early appearance as witnesses before the Committee, and might well think that it would confuse the general issue if they were to divert attention by the introduction at that stage of irrelevant matter." (*Memories and Reflections*, I, pp. 209-210.)

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When the Committee reported in the following June it was unanimous in acquitting the Ministers on the main charges which it was appointed to investigate, but divided as to the view which should be taken of the transactions in the American shares. A vote was finally taken on two draft reports, one prepared by Lord Robert Cecil, the other by Mr. Falconer. The former found the Ministers guilty of "grave impropriety," the latter held that they were all "bona fide convinced" that the American Company had no interest in the agreement between the Postmaster-General and the English Company ; that "on the whole matters relating to the conduct of Ministers which have come before the Committee, all the Ministers concerned have acted throughout in the sincere belief that there was nothing in their action which would in any way conflict with their duty as Ministers of the Crown," and "there is no ground for any charge of corruption or unfaithfulness to public duty or for any reflection on the honour of any of them." In the end the latter report was adopted by a majority of 28 votes to 6.

The report was presented on 13th June, and five days later Mr. Cave on behalf of the Opposition moved a vote of censure on the Ministers concerned "regretting their transactions in the shares of the Marconi Company of America and the want of frankness in their communications on the subject to the House." The Ministers took much of the sting out of the attack by candidly admitting that they too regretted these transactions and were of opinion that they had made a serious, though innocent mistake, in not disclosing them to the House in the previous October. Mr. Cave's motion was rejected by 346 to 268 and an amendment proposed by Sir Ryland Adkins, adopted unanimously : that the House having heard the statements of the Attorney-General and the Chancellor of the Exchequer "accepts their expressions of regret that such purchases were made and that they were not mentioned in the debate of 11th October, acquits them of acting

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otherwise than in good faith and reprobates the charges of corruption brought against Ministers which have been proved to be wholly false." The formula was arrived at after a previous amendment reprobating the charges but omitting the reference to the expressions of regret had been withdrawn, and substantially it expressed Asquith's view. He thought it essential that the Ministers should express their regret, and right that the resolution should put it on record that they had done so. In his own speech he improved the occasion by formulating "rules of obligation and rules of prudence" which he considered should be observed by Ministers in their financial dealings :

"The first, of course, and the most obvious, is that (1) Ministers ought not to enter into any transaction whereby their private pecuniary interests might, even conceivably, come into conflict with their public duty. There is no dispute about that. Again (2) no Minister is justified, under any circumstances, in using official information, information that has come to him as a Minister, for his own private profit or for that of his friends. Further (3) no Minister ought to allow or to put himself in a position to be tempted to use his official influence in support of any scheme, or in furtherance of any contract, in regard to which he has an undisclosed private interest. That again is beyond dispute. Again (4) no Minister ought to accept from persons who are in negotiation with or seeking to enter into contractual or proprietary or pecuniary relations with the State, any kind of favour. That, I think, is also beyond dispute. I will add a further proposition, which I am not sure has been completely formulated, though it has no doubt been adumbrated in the course of these debates, and that is that (5) Ministers should scrupulously avoid speculative investments in securities as to which, from their position and their special means of early or confidential information, they have, or may have, an advantage over other people in anticipating market changes.

This is not an exhaustive code, but these are Rules of Obligation, none of which were violated by the two Ministers involved in the case. I think that in addition to those rules, which I have described as Rules of Obligation—because it seems to me that they have an ethical value and sanction, as well as being based on grounds of expediency and policy—there are, or there certainly ought to be, Rules of Prudence, specially applicable to Ministers and to persons in positions of official responsibility, rules which perhaps never have been formulated, and which it would be very difficult to formulate in precise or universal terms. One of these rules is that in these matters such persons should carefully avoid all transactions which can give colour or countenance to the belief that they are doing anything which the Rules of Obligation forbid. It was that Rule, which I call a rule of Prudence, which in my opinion, and in the opinion of my right honourable friends and colleagues, was not fully observed though with complete innocence of intention, in this case. It has always been my opinion, and it is their opinion, as they told the House quite frankly in the fullest and most manly way.

I have been as frank as my right honourable friends were frank in acknowledging what both they and I think was a mistake in judgment. But their honour, both their private and their public honour, is at this moment absolutely unstained. They have, as this Committee has shown by its unanimous verdict, abused no public trust. They retain, I can say this with full assurance, the complete confidence of their colleagues and of their political associates.”

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Though Mr. Balfour voted with his party on the vote of censure, his speech differed markedly in tone from those of certain of his colleagues, and was substantially in agreement with Asquith's on the main issue. He too, while dismissing the charge of corruption “as perfectly futile and absurd from the beginning and unworthy of the consideration of this House,” desired the House to “leave on record something which indicated its regret at what had taken place.”

*The Times* the next day said that “Asquith rose to the occasion and did justice both to his position and to his reputation,” but to the end of his days he regarded this as the most difficult and painful personal incident that he had had to deal with in the course of his public life. There were those who said that the Ministers should have been sacrificed on the principle that Cæsar's wife should be above suspicion, and he certainly thought that they had themselves very largely to thank for the suspicion that they had incurred on this occasion. But having satisfied himself that there was no corrupt act or intention, he came to the conclusion that the only penalty which he had it in his power to inflict would be out of all proportion to their offending.

## V

By the death of Mr. Alfred Lyttelton in July of this year Asquith suffered the loss of an old and intimate friend, related to him by marriage, from whom he had not been estranged by any differences of political opinion. The tribute which he paid to his friend, when the House of Commons met on 7th July, has long dwelt in the memory of those who heard it and deserves a place in the record of this year :

“We should not, I think, be doing justice to the feelings which are uppermost in many of our hearts, if we passed to the business of the day without taking notice of the fresh gap which has been made in our ranks by the untimely death of Mr. Alfred Lyttelton. It is a loss of which I hardly trust myself to speak, for apart from ties of relationship, there had subsisted between us for thirty-three years a close friendship and affection

1912-1913 which no political differences were ever allowed to loosen or even to invade.  
Age 59-60 Nor can I better describe him than by saying that he perhaps, of all men of this generation, came nearest to the mould and ideal of manhood which every English father would like to see his son aspire to, and if possible, to attain. The bounty of nature enriched and developed not only by early training but by constant self-discipline through life, blended in him gifts and graces which, taken alone, are rare, and in such attractive union are rarer still. Body, mind and character—the school-room, the cricket field, the Bar, the House of Commons—each made its separate contribution of faculty and of experience to a many-sided and harmonious whole. But what he was he gave—gave with such ease and exuberance that I think it may be said without exaggeration that wherever he moved he seemed to radiate vitality and charm. He was, as we here know, a strenuous fighter. He has left behind him no resentments and no enmity—nothing but a gracious memory of a manly and winning personality, the memory of one who served with an unstinted measure of devotion his generation and his country. He has been snatched away in what we thought was the full tide of a buoyant life, still full of promise and of hope. What more can we say? We can only bow once again before the decrees of the Supreme Wisdom. Those who loved him—and they are many—in all schools of opinion, in all ranks and walks of life, when they think of him will say to themselves :

‘This was the happy warrior ; this was he  
Whom every man in arms should wish to be.’ ”







